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By JACKSON COLE

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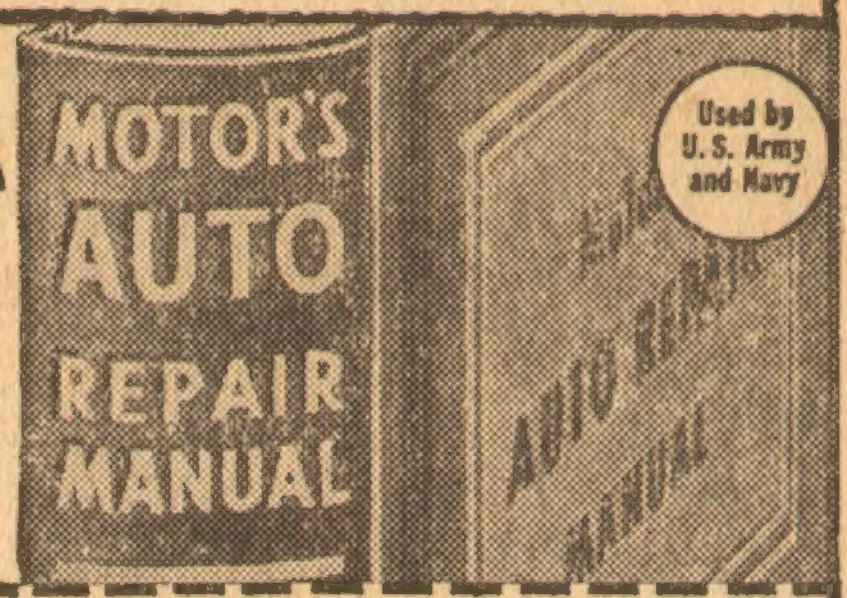

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 26, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION MARCH, 1947

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SIXGUN SYNDICATE

By Jackson Cole

When the Lone Wolf Lawman rides to Gillespie County to take up the battle of the defrauded owners of contested rangeland, he finds that he must pit himself against a dangerous crew of vicious land sharks and scheming murderers who are united in a grim conspiracy of death! 13

SHORT STORIES

JACKSON OF HORNTOWN by Jim Mayo 68
Matt Ben was the last of a notorious clan, but his only pard was a pack burro.

SHOWDOWN AND DRAW by Harold F. Cruickshank 76
Nighthawk Jim Lacy braves the peril of torture to save ranchman Dean Carter.

TROUBLE IS MY SHADOW by Lionel Day 85
With gun odds three to one, Vic Novy calls on some shoot-out powder magic.

STRANGER FROM NOWHERE by Jay Murphy 93
A salty hombre goes into action when a bandit chief raids the Seven Eight.

AND

THE FRONTIER POST by Captain Starr 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters.

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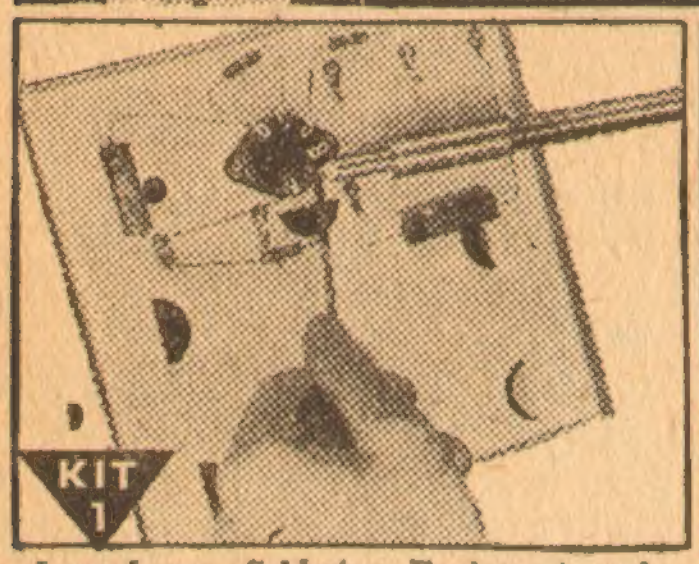

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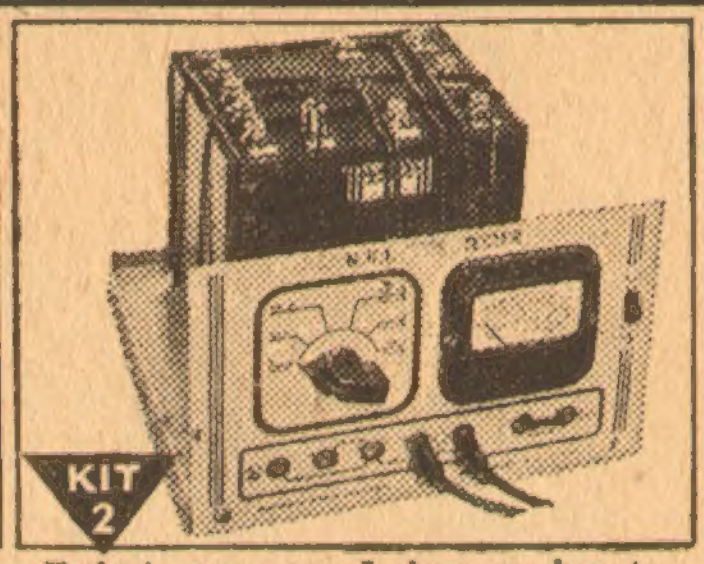

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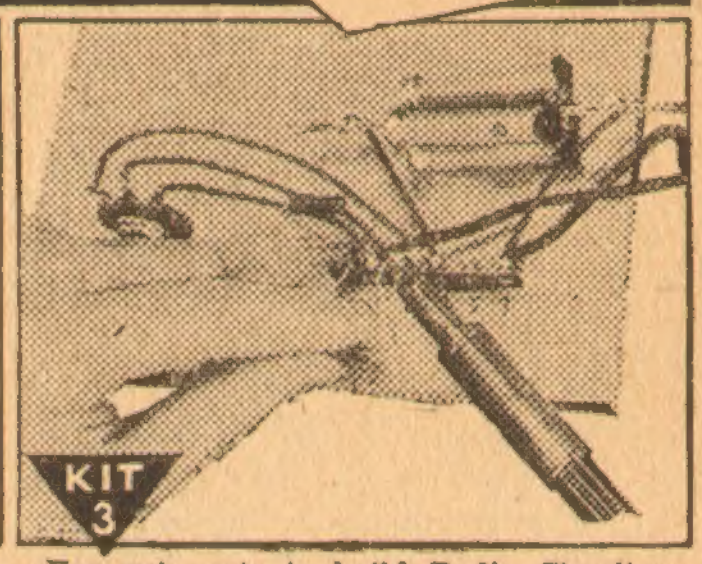

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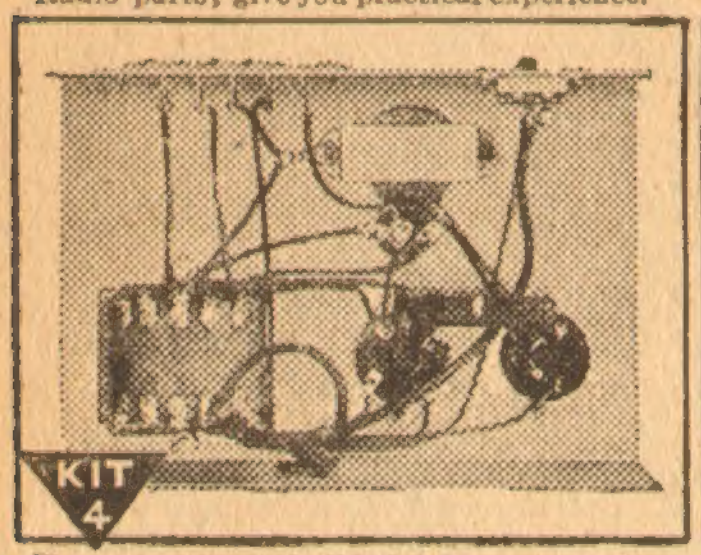

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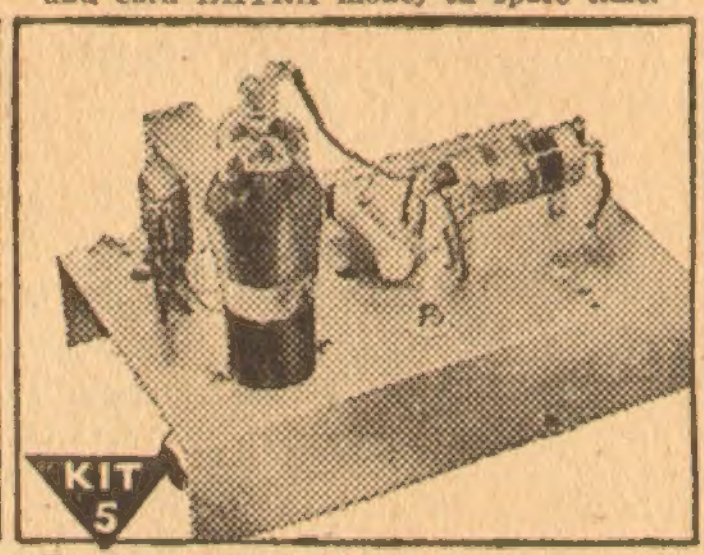

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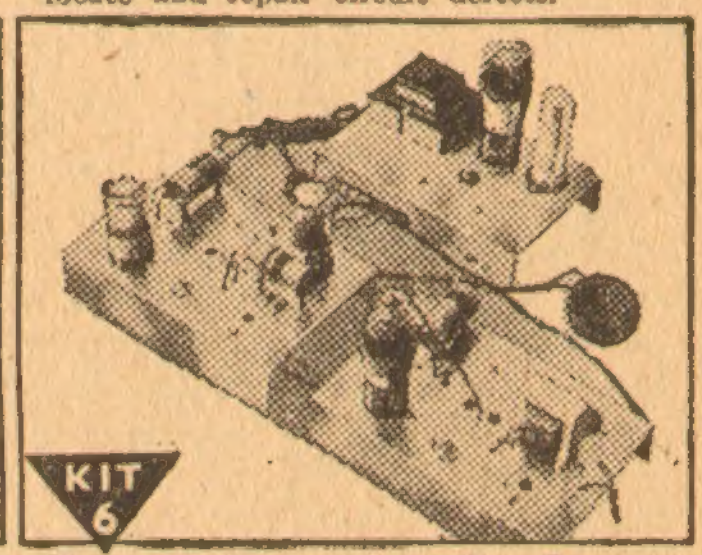

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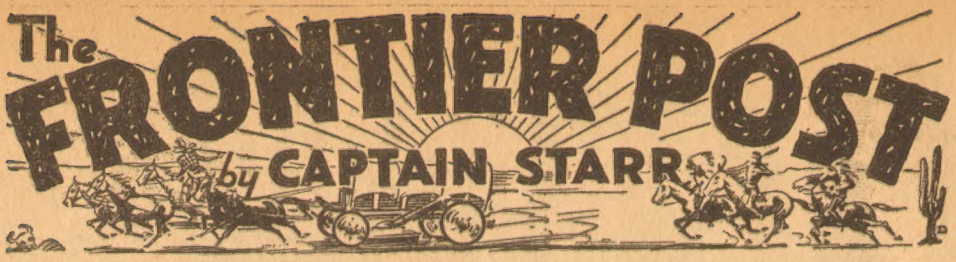


HIYA, gals and galluses! Texas, which produces the biggest and best in most things, isn't a celebrated timber-producing State. Doesn't run to forests, except for the yellow pine stands in east Texas. But now comes a man who says in the near future wood for building and many other uses will grow in the Lone Star State.

But it takes many years, a century and longer, to grow saw logs, you say. Well, this timber of the future isn't saw logs, exactly. It's harder and a heap more durable than any pine or fir, redwood or cedar. It's bamboo.

For ages, says this man, China got along with bamboo as its principal wood. It's unequalled for lightness and strength and when laminated or made into strips, something like our plyboard, can be put to almost any use that our own native lumber can. A stand of bamboo 75 feet high can be grown in three years and Texas, down along the Rio Grande, is the ideal place to grow it, according to this bamboo expert.

Cheerful News

This is about the most cheerful news in a long time for folks in the know, who realize how fast the last virgin stands of Northwest forests are vanishing.

There's another man, a forest analyst named Burt P. Kirkland, who told members of the American Forestry Association right recent that by scientific logging and avoiding present waste, a sustained annual yield of 20 billion board feet can be harvested in Oregon and Washington.

A figure that big is more'n anybody can imagine. It's enough to build a good-sized city, complete to the flagpole in the park. To get down to figures that the imagination can rassle with, in the month of July, 1946, 16 million feet of lumber were shipped from Columbia River ports. Where did it go? Here are the official figures:

9,527,678 feet to Atlantic Coast
2,068,034 feet to California
4,707,846 feet abroad.

In the same month British Columbia loaded out 63 million feet, virtually all of it abroad.

A Substitute for Lumber

Anyhow, this is enough to show the possibilities in growing commercial bamboo—also the dire need for some lumber substitute. Which is something to think about these days of new building and expansion. Specially if you've got a hunk of good Texas soil. Though I don't hanker to ride roundup after old mossyhorn steers high-tailing for bamboo thickets 75 feet high.

Let's turn the talk from wood to stone, from Northwest to Southwest. The particular kind of stone I mean is semi-precious stone, mainly turquoise, used in making Indian jewelry which is so popular these days in the Southwest country.

The Navajos are the main silversmiths and they buy and use 75% of the turquoise, I'm told. A fact not generally known is that most of the turquoise comes from Nevada.

Last winter I met up with an old gent sunning himself on the desert who owned a Nevada turquoise mine. He worked it three-four months of the year, selling the best cutting stone for as high as $50 a pound.

How to Select Turquoise

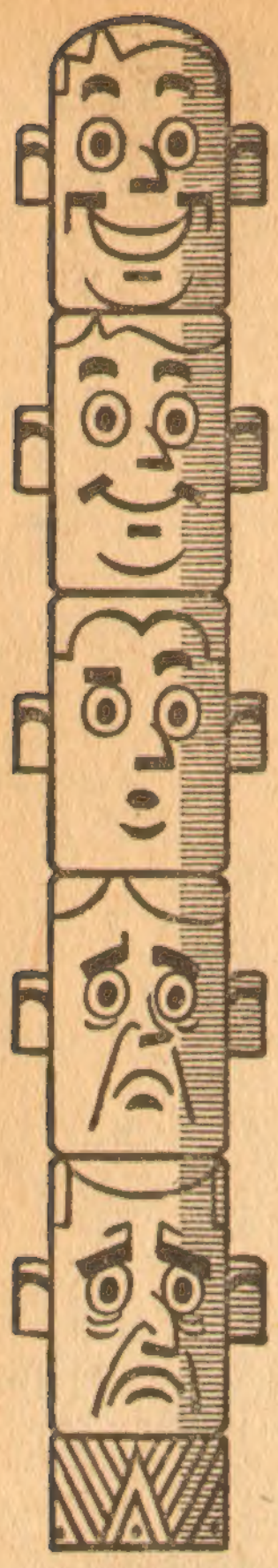
With this Indian jewelry craze on, maybe you folks would admire to know how to select good turquoise.

First off, this gemrock miner told me, the best turquoise is blue, not green, though tourists show a preference for the green stone. Trouble with green, it's softer. Most beads are green turquoise, on account of it being easier to cut.

There are plenty of tricks in the turquoise trade. To make beads and such look old, like high-priced genuine Indian jewelry, the rock is boiled in tallow. Lay tallowed turquoise in the sun and rub your finger over it. If it comes away greasy, you know.

Then there's so-called turquoise, really

(Continued on page 8)



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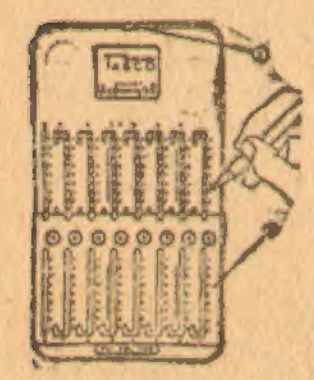

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

cheap matrix, that is artificially colored. Most of it comes, or used to come, from Germany, where they had secret processes for coloring turquoise, agate and even precious stones such as ruby and emerald. One way of high-toning common, colorless chalcedony to bright agate was to boil it in onion skins.

Other gemrock besides turquoise is used in desert country jewelry. The main ones are azurite and crysacolla, which are stained rock and crystal found in copper ore. Crysapraze, stained by nickel, resembles Oriental jade so nearly that even experts are stumped to tell them apart. Really fine chrysoprase is more valuable than jade, and is rare. In rings, bracelets, necklaces and other wearing trinkets, agate and agatized petrified wood are also used. The value of these varies according to color and pattern.

Volcanic Glass

Some tourist customers like jet beads and earrings. The jet they buy is really obsidian, a flinty volcanic glass that is so common that there are entire mountains of it. But it cuts into handsome, shiny-black stones that don't mar or scratch. Most arrow points of western Indians used to be made of obsidian, some rare specimens of which comes with gray bands in it, or even pink and yellow and green.

That's enough, gals and galluses, to give you some idea of how to buy Indian jewelry. Of course, some so-called Indian jewelry is turned out by cheap gimmick factories. In their products the stones are very thin, sometimes only a surface slab cemented over common stone, the kind sold by the ton load to build roads.

A stretch of Arizona highway was built of gravel that collectors found had a lot of high-class gemrock in it. It was a long time before the puzzled road men solved the mystery of how a nice, smooth new stretch of road got pecked full of holes.

Pest Control

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(Continued on page 10)

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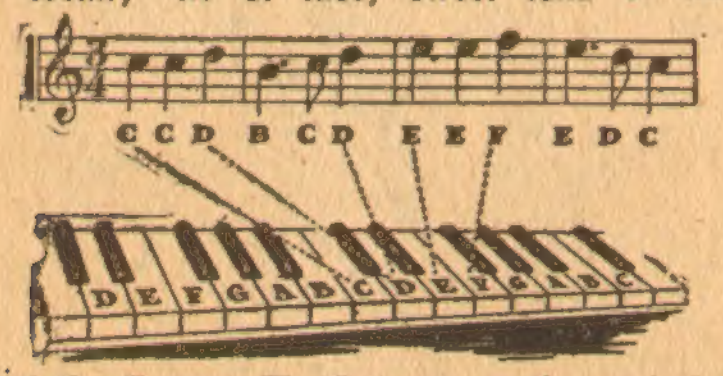

Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "C." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. Now strike the notes as indicated and you'll be playing the melody of that famous patriotic hymn, "America." Easy as A-B-C, isn't it?

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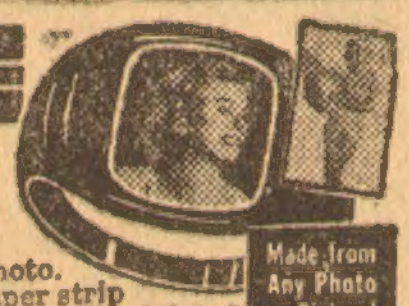

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

"We've got a lot to learn about DDT," was the grim comment of a research expert who was sent to investigate the damage.

I'm mentioning this because about a year back I foretold just such disasters with the potent poison spray being used indiscriminatelike by everybody and anybody. I reckon DDT was mighty valuable in protecting the health of soldiers in tropical countries. But in those war zones nobody worried much about the ultimate results.

Trout Fishing Drops Off

An unaccountable drop-off in trout fishing was noticed this past year, all through the West. Was it due to DDT? Some naturalists say yes. The places least affected were way off from cultivated areas where the poison was used, such as Yellowstone Park and California's high Sierra region.

Other theories to account for poor fishing was some mysterious disturbance caused by sun spots, and by the atom bomb. Not just the experimental blasts at faraway Bikini, but the chain reactions caused during the manufacturing process here in our own land. Scientists call it destructive radiation caused by neutrons wandering off and penetrating almost any kind of matter and lurking there. These runaway neutrons escape from uranium piles, they say, and no way yet has been found to control them.

Seems as though the pioneers who lived in the age before atom bombs and had only Indian troubles and such to contend with had some advantages over us, after all. We have a hard time of it trying to make this a better world to live in, don't we?

Beef Prices

If you're a householder it's not necessary to mention that beef prices recently hit the highest mark in history.

This was good news in the range country and resulted in a record slaughter of cattle. On the whole, ranchers are prosperous these days, all the way from little ol' one-man cow

(Continued on page 106)

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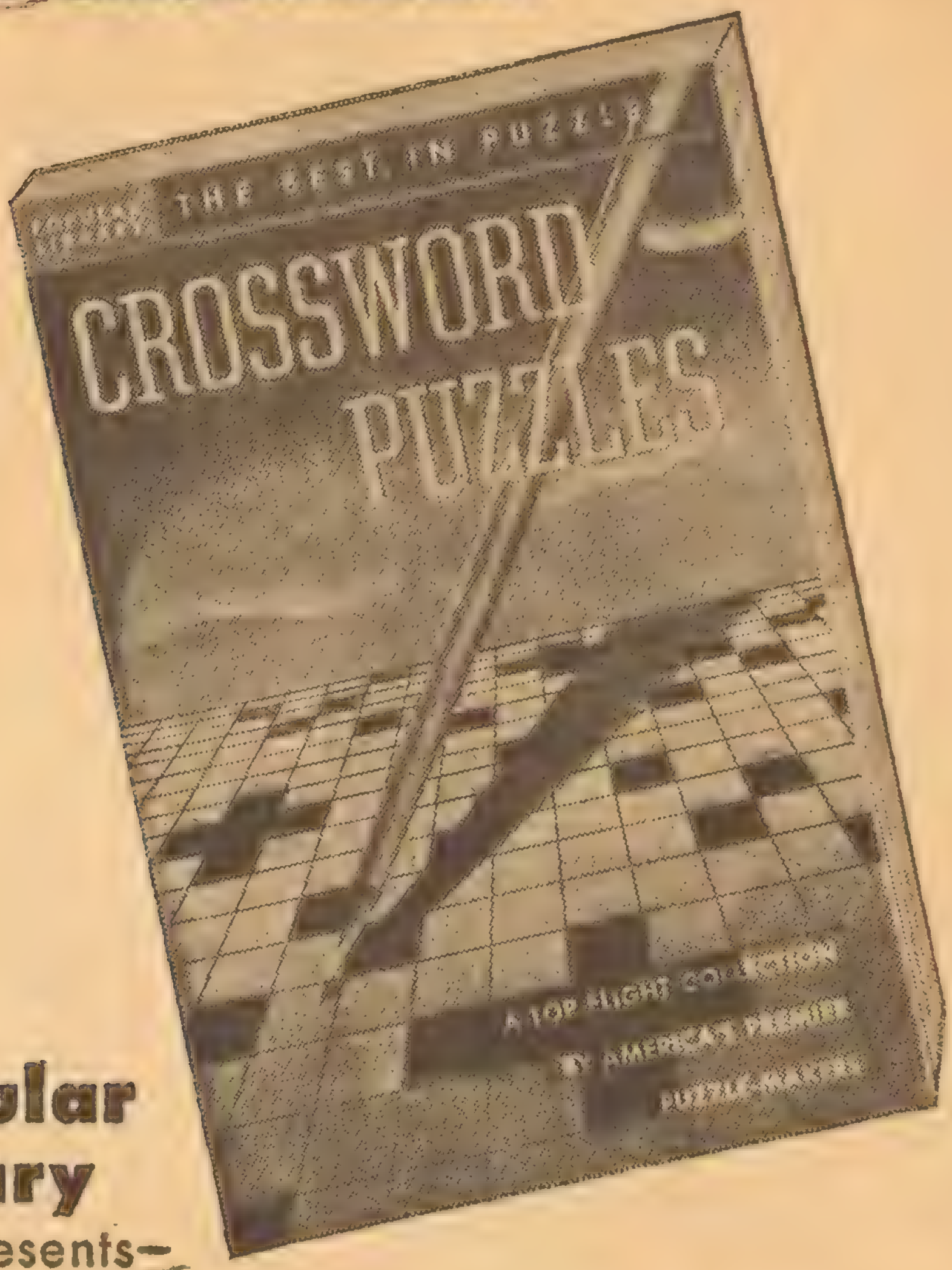

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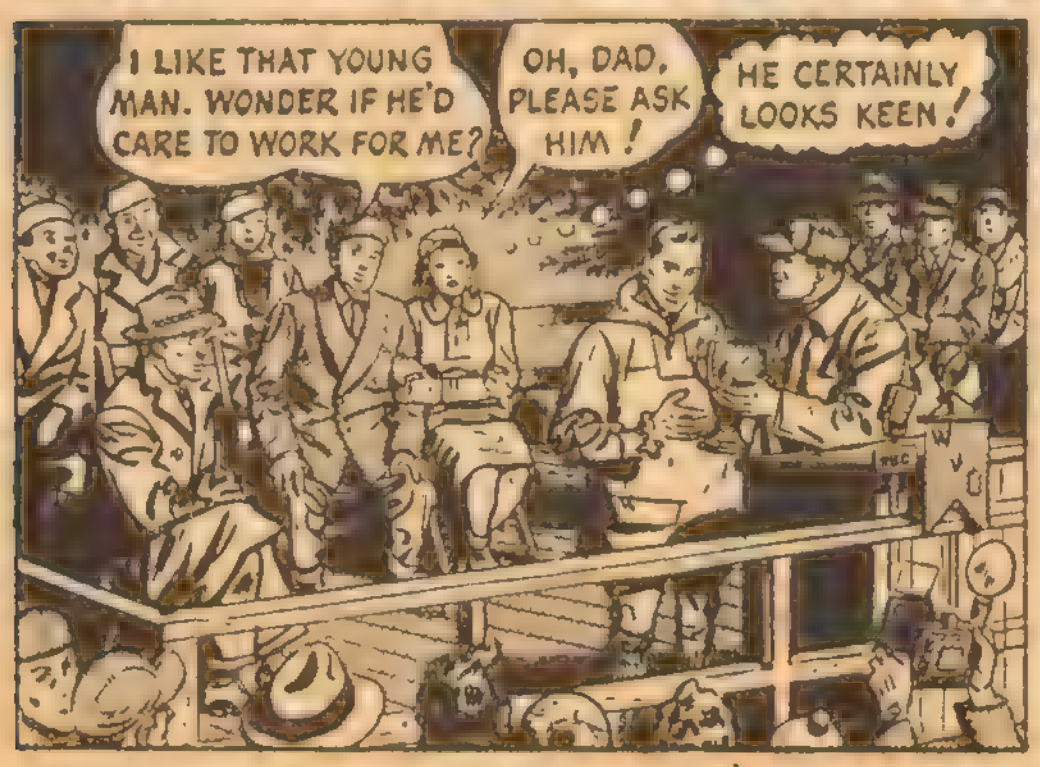

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At the Ranger's order the men froze in their tracks, the cowboy clawing at the rope (CHAPTER III)

SIXGUN SYNDICATE

By JACKSON COLE

When the Lone Wolf Lawman rides to Gillespie County to side defrauded owners of contested rangeland, he pits himself against vicious land sharks and scheming killers!

CHAPTER I

Death Warranty

THE posse straggled across the drainage ditch from the water-hole, the mustang hoofs kicking up droplets of wet sand, and rode toward the small, unpainted shack on the bank of the watering spot.

"Old Possum Ransom lives here," remarked a deputy named Keith Warden to another who rode beside him.

"Yeah," agreed the other deputy. "And there he is now—by the shed."

At that moment, Keith Warden felt his first qualm at having come along with Sheriff Al Craig's party. It was only instinct on the young cowboy's part, because nothing had happened, as yet.

Warden had been in Vanceville with other E P punchers who rode for "Big

Ed" Pallette, owner of a great ranch, when this posse had been formed. The boss had come into the saloon and called them together, saying there was a law job to be done. Like the others, Warden had thought it would be an outlaw-chasing party, good sport while it lasted, with enough danger to spice the run. But now, it appeared, it was to be something much more distasteful.

Keith Warden lagged at the rear. Some twenty deputies followed the leaders—Sheriff Craig, Pallette, and a man named Barney Vale who was a stranger in central Texas. Among the rank and file were some punchers whom Pallette had only recently taken on, but few old-timers.

Sheriff Craig was lean and weathered. He wore a stringy, faded mustache, and the deep wrinkles about his mouth were stained with tobacco juice. His battered Stetson was mouse-gray, his badge was pinned to the pocket flap of a faded shirt, and he wore old black pants and cracked boots. On his face was a serious, set look. He did not seem to like what he had to do.

Big Ed Pallette was a tall, big-boned, breezy fellow around forty. He had straight black hair, dark eyes in a long, horse face, and his complexion was dark, too. Folks called his outfit the "Epe" in pronouncing the brand.

The third man of the leaders was a quiet individual who acted more like a spectator than a member of a posse. Vale was stout, wore a dark suit, a string tie, and a narrow-brimmed felt hat. When he removed his hat to mop his brow, he exposed a bald area in his chestnut hair.

At some time his nose had been broken, so that now it was flat and broad at the bridge and, peering around this damaged appendage, were alert violet eyes. The color and calculating shrewdness of Barney Vale's eyes struck an observer instantly. And, judging by his speech, this Vale was an educated man.

KEITH WARDEN, Pallette's young cowboy now lagging, was lean, too, but his was the leanness of vibrant strength and vitality, acquired through life in the open. His brown hair, cut short, had a healthy sheen, and his small black mustache was neatly clipped. His eyes were keen and bright, his skin bronzed by the sunlight of Texas.

He was proud of the expensive whipcord shirt and trousers, the black boots with silver spurs, and huge Stetson he wore, and of the roan gelding with the E P brand on it which he was riding. The mount was one of the string with which Pallette had provided him, as the rancher did each of his cowboys.

Warden himself might be called an educated cowboy, after a fashion, for he had had more than the average amount of schooling. He had spent a year in college, learning surveying and other subjects studied by embryo civil engineers. But the exciting life of the range had drawn him from those more sedentary activities.

"Let the hosses have a drink, Bud," Sheriff Craig ordered a cowboy riding behind him, as the posse drew rein near the water-hole. "Not too much, though. It's mighty hot, and they're lathered."

"Bud" Mason and another E P cowboy stood by to watch the mustangs, as the posse dismounted and moved toward the shack.

"Howdy, Possum!" sang out the sheriff.

He headed for the old cowman, who stared at the possemen. Pallette and Vale followed Craig over to Ransom, who shot out a long stream of tobacco juice as he waited.

"Afternoon, Al," the old man said in a rusty voice. Living alone as he did, his vocal cords were not too well-oiled.

The E P cowboys who made up the posse trailed after their leaders, but stopped a dozen feet away. They had no orders, so waited silently, some of them—like Keith Warden—uncomfortably. They were aware that "Possum" Ransom was an old nuisance, that he interfered with the sweep of the great E P, as did other comparatively small landholders in the vicinity. But most of them wished him no harm.

"Possum," said Craig, in a worried voice, "I told yuh to get a lawyer and see to yore title here." The sheriff was a plodding, honest man. He was not too bright, but he was a stickler for upholding the law.

"Shucks!" snapped Ransom. "I was here before Pallette. Been here fifty-one years, come next July."

Possum Ransom was eccentric. No one doubted that. But he was not crazy, and

he had lived here long before Keith Warden, for one, was born. Possum had been the first settler in the section.

"Yuh didn't take my advice," growled Craig. "Now I got a dispossess to hand yuh, Possum. I hate to do it. We been good friends. But the law's the law."

"Yuh mean I got to shift to please Pallette?"

Ransom scowled at the horse-faced E P boss, who scowled back. There was bad blood between the two—arguments over fenced water, missing calves and so on.

"Yuh can't show a warranty deed or paper, can yuh, Possum, to prove this is yore land?" demanded Craig. "Pallette owns it—now."

Possum Ransom dropped a gnarled hand to the holstered Frontier Model Colt revolver. It was one of the early models, an antique, thought Warden.

"This here is my title!" old Possum said hotly."Yuh can't do no such a thing to me! Go on—get, Pallette!"

Snarling, Ransom pulled the gun—a mistake, no doubt. There was a sudden movement, a pistol blared. Possum Ransom went down, a dazed look in his bleared eyes. The Frontier Model fell in the sand, and Possum's neck was limp.

It was Barney Vale who had shot Ransom dead. Vale held a short-barreled, large-caliber pistol of newest make in his hand.

"I had to shoot, Sheriff," he said shortly. "He was going to fire at us. It was self-defense."

The cowboys stared, shocked. They saw the poor bundle of what had been a harmless old fellow lying by his unpainted shack. Warden was horrified.

Jim Hatfield

Craig swore, jumped forward, bent over Possum Ransom.

"He's dyin'!" he cried. "Yuh hit him in the heart, I reckon, Vale. Yuh shouldn't have done it."

"The old fool would have hurt somebody," insisted Barney Vale. "It was self-defense."

"I don't believe he'd of shot," said Craig, shaking his head sadly. "It was a bluff."

But the fact remained that Ransom had first drawn his pistol and, technically, Vale was correct.

Big Ed Pallette found his voice.

"He's a goner," he rumbled, "and I'll

swear that Vale saved us from the old hombre's slugs!"

He turned to frown at his cowboys. They understood. That was the Boss's stand.

SOME of the new E P men were grinning. For some reason Ransom's death amused them. They were tough, these recent additions to the E P, and did not mingle with Pallette's established crew. Big Ed had let some of his veterans go to make room for these men, and since they had been taken on Barney Vale had taken to hanging around a lot with Pallette.

Vale seemed to have a hold over the owner of the E P, and over the new punchers also.

After while the posse rode away. Possum Ransom had died quickly, and Craig left two deputies to bury the old fellow.

Keith Warden didn't like what had happened at all. Possum Ransom had irritated him at times, but he could not condone the old man's killing.

He tagged along, with his particular knot of friends, at the rear again. They had hard looks for Barney Vale's back, but the tough gang which Pallette had been hiring did not seem depressed by the shooting. They hung together behind Barney Vale.

Sheriff Craig's party rode westward and came out on a rough dirt road, which they followed, with the sheriff, Vale and Pallette still in front. Turning up a lane, they approached a square, white-painted ranchhouse, a small place but a well-kept one. It had a barn, sheds, and corrals.

"Lew Garrett's," growled young Warden's cowboy comrade. "Wonder why they're stoppin' here?"

"Don't know," said Warden. "But I do know Big Ed don't cotton to Garrett, either. I savvy the boss'd like to grab this stretch. It slices up his range, even more'n what Ransom's does."

Possum Ransom's home lay west of Pallette's spread, and Garrett's place was west of the old squatter's.

Lew Garrett was a strong, big-bodied man of middle-age. He looked anxious as he came out, seeing the posse pull up in his front yard.

"I don't like this at all," muttered Warden.

He meant to keep an eye on Vale this time. If Vale went for his gun, Warden was determined to prevent the man who was a stranger, here anyhow, from killing anybody.

The sheriff got down heavily, followed by Big Ed Pallette and Barney Vale. They faced Lew Garrett.

"Afternoon, Garrett," greeted the sheriff. "Yuh savvy why we're here, I reckon. Yuh had notice before that yore title was no good. Are yuh ready to move?" This was as distasteful to Craig as the scene at Ransom's had been, but such proceedings were part of a sheriff's duty.

Keith Warden listened, watched, and he grew more interested as he saw a girl emerge from the open front door of the house to join Garrett.

Sue Garrett was the rancher's daughter, and a mighty pretty one, Warden thought —a strawberry blonde with wide-set, amber eyes. Then sun caught her thick, piled hair as she came from the porch. She wore a plain blue dress which set off her girlish figure, and the garment's simplicity accentuated the girl's attractiveness. She had some freckles across her nose, and on her pink cheeks, and they showed vividly now, because she was angry as she hurried to her father and glared at the men confronting him. As though to back him, she took hold of her father's arm.

A slim, red-haired, keen-eyed young fellow in cowboy rig came out on the veranda and leaned against a post. Keith Warden knew him—Frank Garrett, who was two or three years younger than his sister Sue.

"There's some mistake, Craig," Lew Garrett was protesting vehemently. "I filed my claim at Austin in the regular way, twenty years ago! This is my property. Yuh've got no right to try to shoo us off."

"He's worried sick," thought Warden, for he could read the misery in Garrett's eyes. Because for all the man's defiant talk it was plain that he was not sure of his stand.

"We've heard all that, Garrett," growled Pallette. "Yuh've told us before. But there ain't no record in Austin that yuh ever proved yore homestead. Mebbe yuh forgot. Anyway, that ain't my hard luck. I've bought the property from the legal owner, who had the genuine warranty and all, set down properlike at the General Land Office in Austin."

Garrett drew in a deep breath of the warm air, air which was his—or which he had long believed to be his. A man grew to love his home, his soil, the familiar

At the deadly fire from the corner the killers broke and ran, back to the cover of the porch pillars (CHAPTER IX)

buildings and the trees. He was obviously trying to control himself, but his face was red, his fists clenched.

"We recorded in Austin, I tell yuh!" he insisted. "Yuh'll have to give me more time. Somethin's gone wrong!"

"Time!" cried Pallette. "Yuh had plenty notice."

"I'm a land expert, Garrett," Barney Vale spoke up coldly. "My office is in Austin. I've gone into this thoroughly. You are now on Pallette's land, with no legal right to be here."

PALLETTE and Vale irritated Garrett. His rage was for Big Ed and the land agent, rather than for Craig, who was only carrying out his duties.

"Somehow or other," growled Garrett, "the papers got mixed up at Austin. That'll have to be straightened out. I ain't goin' to move. Pallette, you want my ranch to round out yore spread. Yuh're a hog, and yuh ain't goin' to get away with it!"

"Keep a civil tongue in yore head or yuh'll get it blowed off!" snapped Pallette.

Warden tensed, ready for trouble.

"Now, now, gents," Sheriff Craig said quickly. "Take it easy!"

"I ought to punch yore face in!" cried Garrett, taking a step toward Pallette. He had the Texan's individualistic instinct to fight for his rights.

Sue tugged at her father's arm, holding him back.

"Dad, stop it! This won't get you anywhere!" She had a nice voice, but she was an angry girl.

She looked with flaming eyes at Pallette and Barney Vale.

"You're thieves, both of you!" she accused hotly. "You've stolen our home from us! I don't know how you worked it, but it's true."

The voices raised in anger had brought Mrs. Garrett from the house. She came down the steps, past her son Frank who had not moved since he had paused on the porch. But a Colt pistol was in his holster and he plainly was ready for a fight.

Mrs. Garrett's hair was graying now, though it had been like her daughter's. She wore a calico dress, with an apron tied about the waist of her ample figure.

"Lew, there's no use!" she called. "You come back in here."

Garrett wanted to fight, but his daughter and wife held him back. He was used to listening to them.

"All right," he grunted.

"Yuh got to shift, Garrett," repeated Craig firmly, but he was relieved that the threat of battle had been temporarily checked.

"We'll move by next Monday," promised Garrett dully.

"Don't try to take any of the buildings or damage 'em in any way," said Barney Vale. "They belong to the owner of the land."

Instantly Garrett was choking with rage again, but Sue kept a tight hold on his arm. Her mother was at the rancher's other side.

"That'll do," Craig said shortly, and nodded. "All right, boys. We'll ride. We'll be back to take possession Monday, Garrett."

"Wait a minute, Sheriff," interrupted Vale. "Yuh've got the legal dispossess on yuh. Why not serve it now and save collecting another posse next week?"

But Craig could be pushed just so far.

"I've given him till next Monday, Vale," he said sullenly.

The sheriff turned to his horse, mounted, and signaled to his men to ride.

CHAPTER II

Trouble Is Near

KEITH WARDEN felt guilty. He was ashamed to be in the company of such men as Vale and Pallette. His boss had not shown up well today.

The puncher glanced back, biting his crisp mustache. He could see the Garretts, with Lew's wife and daughter on either side of him.

"Ed Pallette, you're a thief!" red-headed Sue Garrett called after them.

Young Warden was glum all the way on the ride back to Vanceville. Once there, when the posse split up and wandered toward the saloons, the waddy himself headed straight for his boss, Big Ed Pallette.

"I want my time, Ed," he said coldly.

Pallette frowned at him.

"Yeah? What's wrong? Don't yuh like the grub at the Epe?"

Warden stared straight into Big Ed's deep-set eyes. The boss was angry, but after a silent moment he looked away, backed down. He had worn a brash front,

but Warden wondered if inwardly Pallette was not ashamed of himself.

"All right, Warden," Big Ed muttered. "I'll pay yuh off."

The rancher realized the futility of arguing. This disgusted cowboy was quitting. He would ride to the E P, get his own horse and belongings, and leave.

Which Warden lost no time in doing. Waiting only long enough to give the roan gelding a breather, he mounted and headed out of town. . . .

The night was several hours old when Lewis Garrett, the small rancher who had been dispossessed by Pallette and Vale, entered Vanceville. He rode through a back street, careful to keep in the shadows. Most of the houses were quiet and dark, but there were lights on in several saloons. From the largest of the lot, the Golden Horns, music sounded. Inside the place cowboys and townsmen were drinking, playing cards, or tripping the more or less light fantastic with the girls who worked for the Golden Horns.

Garrett dropped the reins of his big horse up the way from the back door of the saloon. On foot, he moved toward the place. He was angry all through now, angry at what had been done to him under the cover of the law, but he was keeping a grip on his temper. He meant to do his best to fight back at those who had robbed him and his family.

It took a little time, for him to locate Big Ed Pallette and the stranger named Barney Vale. At last he found them drinking and talking together, in a private room at the rear of the Golden Horns.

Through a window Garrett saw Pallette slumped in his chair. The rancher had been imbibing heavily all evening, and his voice was thick. Garrett first caught the man's words in the middle of a sentence.

"—tell you, I'm mighty worried, Vale. Yuh reckon it's all safe and legal-like, what we're doin'? Yuh shore there won't be no trouble?"

Vale was impatient.

"I've told you a hundred times you don't need to worry, Pallette. I've taken care of everything."

"But s'posin' Garrett and others find out yuh done took them papers."

Garrett, close to the open window now, listened with bated breath. He had been sure Vale and Pallette had conspired in some dishonest way, and here was the proof. His heart picked up its beat. Then it gave a terrible leap, as he felt a gun muzzle rammed into his spine, heard a harsh voice saying:

"Reach, you!"

Garrett put up his hands. The talk inside the room stopped, and Barney Vale hurried to the window.

"What is it, Mike?" demanded Vale, sticking out his head and shoulders.

"I caught this hombre snoopin', Barney," said the man called Mike.

"Oh—it's you, Garrett!" drawled Vale.

"You thief!" snapped Garrett.

Vale went out the window, agilely. He moved in a quick, sure way.

Suddenly Garrett realized just how dangerous Vale was.

"No, yuh don't!" gasped the small rancher.

Vale had whipped out a pistol, the same one with which he had killed Possum Ransom, and instantly it was shoved into Garrett's body. It blared, muffled by the closeness to Garrett's clothing and flesh. Lew Garrett slumped against the wall. His mouth was open but no sounds came forth.

Music from the dance hall, and the raucous sounds made by the merrymakers had almost drowned out the revolver's muffled explosion.

Mike bent over Garrett. "Good glory, Barney!" he muttered. "Yuh've killed him!"

LAND, land, land! It's a great invention—but it shore causes a heap of trouble!"

Captain Bill McDowell spoke aloud, though no one was listening as he stared at the map of Texas on his office wall in Austin. As chief of the Texas Rangers, McDowell had proved his ability in his younger days when he had convinced sundry outlaws and Indian raiders that the climate of the Lone Star State was unhealthy for such.

Now, too old and crippled to leap on a mustang and gallop to the scene of a crime, there to mete out justice on the spot, McDowell planned strategy in foiling outlaws who sought to infest the country. But he had to order others to carry out his ideas. These ideas were germinated by the complaints which flowed to headquarters, complaints from injured people, Texans.

The map on the wall, though only a few feet square, represented a lot of land. Texas was eight hundred miles across, and as broad as the distance between the Red River and the Rio Grande. The land

was not flat, like the map. It was hilly here, flat there, wet and black on the Gulf coast and northeast, red in the north, gray and other hues in the south, rocky, with stretches of desertlike sections across the Pecos which were as large as many Eastern states.

There were mountains ten thousand feet high, and swamps and lagoons below sea level. Some of the land was so akin to the popular conception of Hades, that no one could pay men to try and dwell on it. On the other hand, great, rolling districts were fertile. Cotton, wheat and other valuable crops would spring up, while the grassy ranges would support untold cattle herds.

Yet all this, as well as the mineral wealth which had already been discovered and that as yet was unguessed at beneath the land, had been without the slightest value *per se* until men had come to settle on it, to raise families, to wrangle and fight. There had to be some order to it, this land-thirst which mankind evinced; it had to be controlled. So titles had been invented, a land office set up in Austin, making it necessary for anyone claiming desired acreage to register his grant.

Complicating it all, in Texas, was the fact that the land in question had successively belonged to Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy, and the United States. And many Texans possessed the breezy characters which made them cocksure, certain they could protect themselves and their property without benefit of law.

"If I had an army about the size of General Lee's," mused McDowell, "mebbe in time I could tame, curry and hang the State out to dry."

Instead of an army, though, he had a handful of Texas Rangers—great officers, every man, but they had vast distances to cover. Far away, a journey which took weeks, lay El Paso, and the Apaches raided from old Mexico when the moon was up. Outlaws made flying runs from Indian Territory and Oklahoma, and there were plenty of local lights who belonged behind the strongest steel bars yet invented.

McDowell picked up the letter he had just received, and read it again. It had been written in a fine feminine hand, but there was rather a shaky look to some of the letters, and at the bottom corner was a discolored spot. That spot, the old Ranger Captain was sure, had been made by a woman's tear, falling as she wept for her dead husband.

It started a spark within McDowell which, igniting, became a slow fire, which swiftly leaped into a blaze, until within him was a raging conflagration of anger.

He leaped to his feet with a curse, began pacing his office, back and forth, ten paces over, ten back, a pause to stamp his booted foot. The cool blue eyes sparked now. When he became overheated, it was always like this. Captain Bill McDowell exploded.

"Cuss it!" he raved, "I can't figger it out from here! Hatfield's here. I'll have to send him, even if he did just get in from a tough trip. It ain't so far off as usual, this trouble."

McDowell stopped muttering to himself, and raised his chin.

"You outside there!" he howled. "Send Ranger Hatfield in, pronto!"

The clerk jumped from his stool with a guilty start. He had been looking out the window for a moment. McDowell's voice told him the Captain was bellowing mad, and he hastened to inform the Ranger.

Soon Jim Hatfield, McDowell's star officer, walked into headquarters and to McDowell's office. He moved with a pantherish, quiet tread as he entered the room.

Hatfield towered as he stood there in the middle of the floor. For he was well over six feet, with wide shoulders, though they tapered to the fighting man's narrow waist.

HATFIELD wore a clean blue shirt and fresh bandanna, and whipcord trousers tucked into spurred, polished boots. The chin-strap runner of his big Stetson was loose under his rugged jaw. He had jet-black hair sheening with the oil of youth, and somber, gray-green eyes.

Power was written all over him, but the severity of his face was relieved by a wide mouth, which indicated innate good humor. He carried well-tended Colt .45s in the supple holsters which were attached to the cartridge belts. Bronzed as an Inca image by the wind and sun of Texas, Hatfield was Texas manhood at its peak.

The almost lazy way he carried himself in repose belied his real swiftness in action. For those slender hands of his could whip out and shoot the Colts in his holsters with blinding speed.

McDowell always felt comforted when

Hatfield was near. He knew he could count on the Ranger as he once could on himself to carry out a mission.

"How are yuh?" he growled. "Sort of rested?"

"Yes, suh." Hatfield had a soft, drawling voice, almost gentle. "Couldn't feel better, Cap'n Bill."

"*Bueno.*" McDowell passed over the letter. "Read this from a Mrs. Garrett. They had a ranch near Vanceville and it was took away from 'em. Her husband was shot and killed, but she ain't shore who done it. She suspects a big rancher named Pallette might savvy. Seems this Pallette, who owns a spread he calls the E P over there, has been cleanin' out smaller fry who was in his way when he wanted to expand. This Mrs. Garrett claims her husband did file their land, but somethin's gone wrong about the deed. And there was another shootin', she says. An old feller named Possum Ransom, a squatter. Vanceville ain't far, Jim—not a hundred miles—so yuh could make it in twenty-four hours."

Hatfield looked at the letter again, carefully noting the names and places mentioned.

"I'll run over for a look-see right off, Cap'n," he said. "Sounds like high-handed business."

"Go to it. Let me hear what's up. It's got queer angles to it I ain't run into before."

The Ranger nodded. When Captain Bill hadn't heard of something, it must be unique indeed, for the old captain's experience ran the gamut of human experiences.

With all the facts available in Austin at his command, Jim Hatfield shook hands with McDowell and strolled outside. In the sunshine Hatfield inhaled a deep breath of the warm, aromatic air. He loved the outdoors, the wild danger trails he rode. They were life to him.

In the shade stood his golden sorrel, the companion of many adventures. Goldy was a magnificent, long-legged, untiring animal, as intelligent in his own way as the Ranger was in his.

He was saddled, waiting for Hatfield, and greeted him by nosing the Ranger's hand and sniffing. A carbine rode in a sling under one of Hatfield's long legs as he mounted. There were iron rations in his saddle-bags, a fresh shirt or two, and a poncho was rolled at the cantle.

Equipped for any campaign, Hatfield

The bullet sent by the Ranger as he bobbed up at the window, tore through the bunch, and Vale went down with his men (CHAPTER XII)

waved a hand to old McDowell, who stared nostalgically from the window, wishing that he, too, were riding.

CHAPTER III

Interrupted Lynch Party

RANGER Hatfield rode along the dirt lane toward a square, white-painted ranchhouse, a small place, but one which looked as though it had been cared for lovingly. But the wooden signpost, which said "Lewis Garrett," at the entrance to the private way, was filled with fresh bullet-holes, as though men had been using it for a target.

In a corral at one side mustangs moved about, and on the front veranda saddles and other gear, as well as a stack of heavy rifles had been piled. A couple of heavy-jowled, thick-set men in leather clothing and big hats sat there. They stared fixedly at the tall officer on the golden sorrel as he approached.

Only the day before yesterday, Hatfield had been called by Captain McDowell and despatched from Austin. The Ranger had made the run easily. He had found time to sleep and rest the sorrel, and now was spruced up, shaved and clean. He had made inquiries about how to find the Garrett place, for he had decided to call on Mrs. Lewis Garrett first of all, even before talking to Sheriff Craig in Vanceville. After all, she was the chief complainant.

Now he was here, but he saw no sign of Mrs. Garrett.

He could hear a raucous, drunken voice which apparently meant to be jovial, howling inside the house:

"Yo-ho-ho and a keg of red-eye!"

The Garrett ranch did not have the air of decency the Ranger had expected. He was suspicious, ready for trouble, as one of the burly men on the porch sang out:

"Hey there, stranger! Lookin' for somebody?"

The two toughs were watching him from across the low railing around the veranda. Colts showed in their oiled holsters. Their hands were calloused, dirty, their eyes hard. There were other men in the house. Hatfield could glimpse them through the open windows.

"Garretts ain't here, are they?" Hatfield drawled.

"Garretts?" repeated the man who had hailed him. The fellow's jutting jaw needed a shave. He wore twin, blue-steel pistols with smooth walnut stocks. "Never heard of 'em."

The other man on the veranda considered this humorous. His lips twitched back and Hatfield glimpsed tobacco-stained teeth.

The Ranger kept his temper. "The sign says this is the place I want, and I was directed here. I'm huntin' a job punchin' cows and was told mebbe they'd take me on."

"Garretts done moved," volunteered the man with the stained teeth.

"Yuh savvy where they went to?" asked Hatfield.

"Yuh're shore a questionin' son, ain't yuh?" remarked the fellow with the jutting jaw, determined to have his joke at any cost. "What yuh think we are—an information bu-row? How in blazes can we keep track of such folks?"

Hatfield eyed him coolly. He saw that men had come to the open windows, and to the doorway, for a look at whoever was outside. They were of the same stamp as the two on the porch, though of different shapes and sizes. Some were bearded, others simply dirty of face. All were heavily armed, steel-eyed, the sort of men who would be ready for a fight any time. The vocalist was still rendering his song, tearing it apart now.

"We don't know where the Garretts went to," Stained Teeth said hastily. "But if yuh're huntin' a ridin' job, why not try Pallette's Epe? Yuh must of seen his brand sign when yuh passed there, if yuh come on the east-west road."

"That's right, I did. Yuh reckon he'd take me on?"

"If yuh'd quit partin' yore hair in the middle," observed the humorist, "and quit singin' sopranner, yuh might do."

This was too much for Heavy Jowl's partner, who bust into a guffaw.

"Yuh're shore a card, Henny! Singin' sopranner!" He smote his leather-clad thigh in a frenzy of amusement.

"Yuh're a ring-ting-tootin' little joker, ain't yuh?" drawled the Ranger. "I ain't felt so tickled since my last uncle dropped dead."

There was no sense in maintaining a polite front with such men. They looked on ordinary courtesy as cowardice.

The wind taken out of his sails, the jester grew stern and mean.

"Go on—get, Sonny," he snarled. "This

is private property. Hightail! We don't cotton to strangers."

All the men were ready, arms hanging limp at their sides, watching every move Hatfield made. There was no use in starting a gun battle under such conditions. They could pick him off from the windows without any trouble, and he had no cause, as yet, to battle them.

He gave a short nod, a shrug, turned the sorrel, and started away. His back to them might be an invitation, but he had to chance it.

HE WAS twenty-five yards from the porch when he heard the close shriek of a six-shooter bullet, then the crisp crack of the revolver. He whirled in his saddle. Mr. Joker had sent that hurrying slug after him.

" 'Scuse me, suh," called the jester. "My foot slipped!"

Laughter came from his audience, and the tough was vastly pleased with himself. Hatfield rode calmly on. The Garrett place was in enemy hands—that was plain.

A quarter-mile from the little ranch, a horseman approached the Ranger. Hatfield saw his dust and was on the alert. A rider on a rangy brown horse galloped up. He wore leather, a strapped Stetson, pistols, and a short-barreled rifle was under one leg.

All in all, he looked as though he might be of the same breed as the men at Garrett's. When he came close to the tall officer, he was watchful, did not take his dark-lined eyes off the Ranger. But as Hatfield made no attempt to stop him, he flashed by, with a quick wave of the hand, and sped on along the road.

"Seems in a powerful hurry," mused Hatfield.

Dust hung in the air over the highway. Hatfield's gray-green eyes sought the hill a few hundred yards from the margin of the road. It was a covert of long-needled, short pines, and would make a good observation point.

"I'll see what holds, I reckon," he remarked to Goldy.

From the hill he could see the Garrett ranch. Sure enough, the rider turned in there, and rode on to the house.

Hatfield had not long to wait, before a dozen horsemen, having saddled up at the corral, came back along the road, passing the point where the Ranger had swung off. Among them were the two with whom he had spoken at the ranch.

"That first hombre was a messenger or scout," decided the Ranger. "He's called his pards out and, judgin' from their looks, it ain't for a tea-party."

Letting them have a start, Hatfield returned to the road and leisurely trailed after them.

They left the highway after a short run, and cut northward over broken country, grassy areas, sliced by wooded draws and rocky sections. He kept after them, taking care to stay out of their sight. He could move by riding behind natural contours.

The bunch, led by the messenger, knew just where to go. Out on a flat stretch stood a cowpony, reins to the ground. Some hundred yards away was a slim young man in tan whipcord trousers, a heavy shirt, a big Stetson, and boots whose polished sides sheened in the sunlight. He looked like a cowboy, but was busy squinting along the sights of a transit, a surveyor's instrument. He had with him stakes, poles, and other equipment needed to determine land boundaries.

So absorbed was the young man in his task that the dozen toughs from the former Garrett ranch were almost upon him before he knew they were coming. For on the west edge of the flat was an outcropping, rocks and clay, overgrown with brush, and the gunslingers had come up behind it, and cut through a narrow gap.

The surveyor suddenly caught the thud of hoofs, glanced up and saw them. Their carbines and rifles were trained on him. His horse stood too far away for him to hope to reach the mount. He froze where he was.

Hatfield, using the same cover the attackers had, approached as rapidly as possible. He dismounted at the gap, seized his carbine, and took up a position in the rocks, on the side nearer to the flat stretch. The wind was his way, and he could hear their loud voices.

"What yuh doin' here, cuss yuh?" shouted the leader of the bunch—the joker."

"I'm practisin' surveyin'," the cowboy told him. "Done studied it some and I didn't want to get rusty."

A laugh greeted this. They evidently knew he was lying.

Hatfield, his carbine cradled in his left arm as he squatted in the bush, thought the young fellow held himself well. He didn't show the fear which must have

seized him as he found himself caught.

"He looks like a rustler to me," observed another gunhand.

"That's right!" yelped another. "I know him now. He's Blackjack Warden, the Terror of Tuscaloosa! I savvy him. Let's give him what he deserves!"

It was crude, cruel humor. A couple of riders had jumped from their saddles, to come up behind the cowboy and snatch his pistol. Another, with the rustler angle introduced, quickly readied a lariat, and dropped the loop over the young man's head.

The would-be humorist, the burly tough with whom Hatfield had exchanged words, picked up the transit, and smashed it over the victim's head and shoulders. The instrument was broken, and the cowboy's Stetson caved in. The force of the blow knocked the victim off his feet.

The two men holding the rope hauled on it. They ran toward the rocks where Hatfield was hidden, followed by the bunch. Most of them were grinning, having a good time at this deadly sport.

A pine, with a limb high enough for their purpose, was growing at the base of the rocks, and one of the ropers began tossing the lariat end. He missed the branch a couple of times, then the long rope went over, was seized and jerked tight. The unfortunate cowboy was lifted clear of the ground, his neck nearly broken. He got his hands up, clawing frantically at the tight noose to keep from strangling.

"Let him down for a jiffy," growled the vicious leader. "We'll have to tie the cuss's hands."

"Let's use him for a target while he's kickin'!" suggested another.

"Drop it and reach, gents!" commanded the Ranger.

The voice, slow and drawling in normal conversation, had an incisive, commanding note which struck straight home with the chilling stab of a stiletto point. Each outlaw in the bunch believed he had been directly threatened, and froze in his tracks. The cowboy sprawled on the earth, gasping for wind, clawing at the rope around his throat.

"I can take most of yuh with me if yuh rush me," Hatfield threatened.

He was close, but they could see only the black muzzle of the steady carbine trained on them.

"Who are you, and what yuh want?" demanded the joker, after a moment.

"I want you boys to clear out," Hatfield said, in a cold, deadly voice. "Leave that feller lie. If yuh try to hurt him any more, I'll kill ev'ry cuss in yore outfit! Savvy?"

CHAPTER IV

Important Information

THE outlaws considered their unexpected predicament for a few breaths of time. If the man in the rocks was alone, they could get him in a concerted rush, but if he was anything of a marksman, it would mean several dead and wounded. They decided that the game was not worth the risk. They could try another time.

"All right," said the man who had been called Henny, his eyes narrowed. He turned slowly away, but kept his hands up. Back over his shoulder, he called, "Can we have our hosses?"

"Yeah. Go to 'em, mount and ride off. Keep a-goin'."

The men of the tough bunch were angry, and shamefaced at their defeat, but they trailed across the flat, and took to saddles. Now and then one would glance at the rocks in which the Ranger crouched.

"Yuh'll pay for this, whoever yuh are!" howled the joker, shaking his fist from the back of his horse. Hatfield sent a carbine slug over his head, so close it nearly ventilated the peak of the fellow's Stetson.

"Excuse me," he called. "My foot slipped."

Some of them were already spurring off. But the leader heard that, and knew who it was in the rocks. The gang rode away.

"Hey you, down there!" called the Ranger to the cowboy. "Can yuh reach yore hoss?"

"Yeah, I'm not hurt much."

The waddy's voice was hoarse with rage, his face as red as flame. He had the loop from around his throat, but on his neck were several scarlet burns which had been made by the rope. His hand went to his empty holster. His overpowering impulse was to fight, to send lead after the men who had come so close to killing him.

He got up on one knee, pushed to his feet with his hand. He was dizzy, and kept shaking his head. He was a good-looking young man, with crisp brown hair and a clipped mustache. He also had fine features, and carried himself with a resolute air.

Hatfield watched him carefully. As the cowboy, in his spurred boots, started to run awkwardly for his gray gelding, some of the enemy opened fire at long range. Spurts of dirt leaped up around the running man.

Hatfield threw up his carbine and answered. His bullets were accurate, and he was shooting from a steady stance. A mustang gave a great leap, began fighting the bit. A tough snatched at his shoulder, bent to one side with pain as a hunk of lead slashed his flesh. The outlaw bunch quit trying to kill the cowboy, and spurred off.

Now the man the Ranger had snatched from death was in the saddle, reins up. He rode with practised grace, and the gray horse was a fine animal. He came galloping to the rocks, and Hatfield signaled him through the gap.

For the first time, as the Ranger rose and went to the path, the two came face to face. The cowboy stared with deep curiosity at the tall officer.

"So you're the man who saved my bacon!" he explained. "I'm shore grateful, mister."

"Forget it." Such thanks embarrassed the Ranger. "What's yore handle?"

"Warden, Keith Warden. I was surveyin' out there when them lobos come up on me, and I—"

"Let's ride first, and talk as we go," suggested Hatfield. "They're beginnin' to circle now and they'll mebbe try for us again."

Warden nodded. He kept licking his lips, clearing his throat for that rope had been mighty uncomfortable. Now and then the waddy gave an involuntary shudder.

Hatfield whistled, and the golden sorrel trotted to him. He mounted and, with Warden at his side, they moved swiftly off.

"Here they come!" Warden said swiftly. "They're tryin' to cut us off from the road!"

"I ain't too familiar with these parts," said the Ranger. "What's the best way for us to run?"

"I'd say west, but let's keep in the open. We don't want to come too close to Garrett's—I mean, the ranch them killers have took over."

Goldy and Warden's gray were superior runners. They could outdistance anything of the usual mustang variety so, taking the turn as Warden suggested, the two young men picked up speed. The killers kept doggedly after them for a time, but the range was too long for any kind of shooting.

"My handle is Hays—Jim Hays—Warden," Hatfield said, after a while, in answer to the cowboy's natural query. "I was passin' through, and saw 'em workin' on yuh."

IT WAS the Ranger's way not to reveal his name at once, when he first entered new territory, but to study a case carefully before announcing his calling. In this way, Hatfield could uncover the truth, and the enemy would have no warning that a Texas Ranger was on the spot.

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

Warden was quite willing to talk. And why not? The tall man on the sorrel had after all, just given him back the life of which he had despaired.

"They're gunhands, yeah," explained Warden. "They're on Big Ed Pallette's payroll but they ain't regular waddies at all. They're hired for strong-arm work and killin'. That Garrett ranch belonged to some good friends of mine. It stood in Pallette's way, like others, and by some sort of crooked work, the Garretts were run off. Lew Garrett hisself was killed one night in Vanceville. I don't doubt Pallette or Vale done it—mebbe both of 'em."

"Vale?" repeated the Ranger. "He another big rancher?"

"No, Barney Vale don't belong hereabouts. But ever since he showed up he's been workin' hand in glove with Big Ed Pallette. Vale's some sort of land shark, I believe. I saw him shoot down Possum Ransom, an old squatter who had a shack up the line. Vale claimed Possum meant to kill the sheriff and Pallette, but— Well, he was a funny old cuss, Possum, cantankerous mebbe, but no harm to anybody."

"What makes you think Vale and Pallette might have downed Garrett?" Hatfield asked, curiously.

"I don't know. It's my hunch—got no proof. Yuh see, Garrett was mighty sore, the way things went. He had a clean title, from all I can find out, but it couldn't be found registered in Austin, though Garrett swore he'd done all the law said he must do to cinch his hold on the land. He went to town, and I believe it was to try and check up on Vale and Pallette. Then he was found, shot dead, and dumped in a gutter. It was an awful blow to his wife and kids."

"Where's this Mrs. Garrett and the rest of the family now?" asked Hatfield.

"Livin' with a cousin about fifteen miles west of here. I been stayin' there myself, when I ain't workin'. Today I was checkin' boundaries, surveyin', so's to see what's what."

"Yuh savvy civil engineerin'? I know a bit myself."

"I studied a while, before I turned cowhand," explained Warden. "I can handle a transit and lay out corners and so on."

Hatfield glanced back over his big, hunched shoulder. The gun bunch were still plugging along on their trail, but they were losing distance and did not look as dangerous as they had when closer.

The Ranger congratulated himself on having snatched Keith Warden from death. Not only had he saved a splendid young Texan, but he had gained a valuable ally who was supplying him with the vital information he needed. He found Warden's character a pleasing one, for he believed the cowboy to be courageous, shrewd, genuine.

Warden indicated some bunches of cattle off to the right.

"E P stock," he informed Hatfield. "They call the spread the Epe. I rode for Pallette till he got ambitious and started wipin' out small folks in his way. Lot of the boys quit, when I did. They got strong stomachs, but it was too much. Now Pallette hires toughs, like yuh seen stringin' me up. They'd have killed me in a few minutes."

They kept going. After a few more miles of the hopeless chase, the joker and his merrymen shook their fists at the two, and cut south. Warden grinned triumphantly.

"They've quit!" he said exultantly. "They're on their way back to Garrett's old ranch. What say we head for Tate's? Mrs. Tate is that cousin of Mrs. Garrett's. That's where Sue Garrett and her mother are stayin'. We can rest up there and eat."

"*Bueno.*" Hatfield wished to see Mrs. Garrett, widow of the rancher, who had been mysteriously killed. "Yuh got any idea what the handle of that chunky hombre is—the one who was so anxious to see you kick air?"

"That sidewinder? They call him Five-Finger Henny, on account he always measures his drinks to five fingers. He's a tough one."

The Ranger was considering the situation with deep seriousness. Those killers had caught Warden, who was already in trouble because he had told off Pallette, snooping on the range. Probably they had been given orders to kill the cowboy, who had thrown in his lot with the Garretts.

THE afternoon was well along when the two young fellows rode into the yard at Tate's little ranch. At once the Ranger realized what powerful lure had drawn Keith Warden to toss in his lot with the Garretts—as soon as his eyes lit on Sue Garrett.

Sue had been watching for Warden. It was easy to tell that by the way she jumped from her chair, by the smile which

lighted her face. Hatfield had an eye for a pretty girl, and knew this one was exceptional. She came toward them now, as they dismounted, crossing the yard. She was animated, and Hatfield caught just one glimpse of her amber eyes, before they went past his face to Warden's.

"I was getting worried, Keith," Sue said quickly. "Did you have any trouble?"

"A little," Warden confessed. "But Jim Hays here got me out of it, Sue. This is Sue Garrett, Jim."

The girl acknowledged the introduction politely, but she was anxious to know what had happened to Warden.

"I knew it!" she cried, when he told her what had occurred. "You mustn't risk your life by going over there any more, do you hear?"

Warden grinned, winking at the Ranger.

They took care of the horses, then followed Sue into the house. The Tate place was a small outfit, but it controlled a small lake and part of the brook running from it. George Tate was an elderly, steady-looking Texan. He had three sons and several daughters, and with the help of two hired hands, they ran the ranch.

In the small but comfortable home, Hatfield was introduced by Warden to Mrs. Garrett. The Ranger smiled down at the widow of the wronged rancher. She did not know—yet—that it was her complaint which had brought Hatfield here from Austin.

She was around fifty, and had a comfortable, ample figure. Her hair was graying, but she was still an attractive woman. The Ranger could see where Sue got her good looks. The mother showed the terrible shock and strain she had undergone. It was plain in her eyes, her manner.

It had not been long since her husband had died violently in Vanceville. Yet she had gained control of herself. She greeted Hatfield heartily, as Warden began to tell them all about the events of the afternoon.

The room was crowded with Tates—boys and girls, young men and women. Mrs. Tate came from the kitchen, where she was preparing the evening meal. When it was learned that the tall stranger with Warden had saved the cowboy's life, nothing was too good for him. Drink was brought, pressed on him, and he was urged to stay with them.

After a time, the Ranger, seated beside Mrs. Garrett, was able to get her to talking. She was willing enough to go over the details of the entire affair, and was instinctively drawn to Hatfield, recognizing him as a friend.

But she could add little to the information the Ranger had already gleaned, though she corroborated all Warden had told him. The Garretts had surely filed their title properly—yet it was now missing at the Austin land office. Their lawyer had been unable to locate any record to prove the property belonged to Garrett.

"And Frank, yore son—is he with yuh?" asked Hatfield, when Mrs. Garrett had finished.

"He's gone to Austin," she replied. "He's determined to get to the bottom of it all. I wanted him to stay with me but he was so restless, after his father was killed, that he set about solving the mystery himself. I had a letter from him this morning. Frank says he may get a job as a clerk at the General Land Office."

Mrs. Tate called them all into the kitchen to eat then, and they went. The food was excellent and there was plenty of it—fried steak and potatoes, home-made bread and butter, molasses, coffee, baked beans and other foods they enjoyed. The big family and their guests sat around the groaning board, waited on by the Tate girls and Sue. Hatfield aroused the admiration of the other young men by his capacity, though they were champions themselves at the table.

They spent a pleasant evening, and later the Ranger bunked in the shed with Warden and the other cowboys.

Next morning, Warden begged him to stay, at least for a few days.

"I spoke to Tate, Jim," young Warden said. "He says he'll give yuh a job if that's what yuh're huntin'. Hang around a while."

"Thanks a-mighty, Warden, but I got to mosey. I'll be back, though, I reckon. Meanwhile, if yuh don't mind a bit of advice, after this keep yore horse handy while yuh're surveyin'!"

Warden grinned ruefully.

"I shore will," he promised. "They'll have to burn the woods and sift the ashes to catch me again." He rubbed his lean throat speculatively.

Warden rode with Hatfield to a crossroads. A faded wooden sign pointed southeast. "Vanceville," it said, in a lacklustre way.

"Yuh'll cross E P range if yuh short-

cut," informed Warden. "I wouldn't trust none of Pallette's men these days, though, if I was you. He's shore taken a rough bunch."

"*Gracias,*" said Hatfield. "When I finish my business, I'll mebbe come back."

He saluted Warden, and they parted.

CHAPTER V

Big Ed

CROSSING the rolling, grassy range, the golden sorrel picked up speed. It was a sunny, fine day, with a gentle breeze from the west. The warm herbage gave off a pleasant scent, and butterflies and birds flitted over the flowers. Cattle grazed in bunches.

Hatfield was planning to stop at Pallette's first, then make for Vanceville, and Warden had told him the location of the E P Ranch. Hatfield knew he had made an enemy of Five-Finger Henny and others of the prize pirate crew which had been placed in charge of the Garrett spread by Pallette, so he intended to approach the E P with due caution, just in case any of the men he had fought against might be there.

Smoke stained the clear blue sky. He could see it before he topped the last wooded rise overlooking the large collection of buildings on the river bank. It was the E P, a really great spread, with a many-winged ranchhouse, big bunkhouse to accommodate up to fifty punchers; corrals, stables, cribs, and storage sheds. It was from the forge chimney of the blacksmith's shop that the smoke issued.

Ready for anything, the Ranger slowly rode into the yard. In the shade lounged a group of men. They wore the clothing of cowboys, but in no other way did they resemble genuine waddies. And they had the same vicious air as the fellows with whom the Ranger had clashed at the Garrett ranch. They eyed him insolently, but no one attempted to stop him as he strode to the long front veranda.

"Howdy, gents," he said, addressing the two men who were sitting in rocking-chairs on the porch.

"Howdy yoreself," replied one of them, a tall, big-boned fellow.

He was perhaps forty. His black hair was straight, and his dark eyes, with black circles under them, were set deep in a horselike, doleful face. He certainly had a worried look, thought Hatfield, as though much dissatisfied with the way the world was treating him.

His clothing was expensive. His hat was worth seventy-five dollars, perhaps, and his boots were custom-made. Everything he wore had been made from the best materials.

The man beside the horse-faced fellow was stouter, shorter. He wore a "city" suit and white shirt. His hat lay on the porch floor beside him, and Hatfield saw a bald area in his chestnut hair. His nose had been broken, and his eyes were a dark-violet. They were startling in their strange color and piercing gaze.

"Are you Ed Pallette?" Hatfield asked the man who had deigned to greet him.

"That's me," acknowledged Horse-Face.

"I was told I might pick up a ridin' job here. My handle is Hays."

"I see." The tall man nodded. "Yuh can rope, I take it, and savvy the work. Yuh can shore ride, for I watched yuh comin' across the pasture. I could use yuh—" He stopped short as his companion cleared his throat significantly.

"Where are you from?" demanded the man with the gap in his hair, coldly, suspiciously. "Who told you to ask for work here?"

"Why me, I'm from where I come from," Hatfield drawled pleasantly, "and an hombre who met my Dutch uncle in Oscaloosa told my best friend's brother a bird had told him the E P needed riders."

"H'm." The humor did not please the inquisitive man. "You'd be better off to keep a civil tongue in your head." He lapsed into scowling silence.

Big Ed Pallette gulped. "Well, I don't know." He shot a quick sideward glance at his associate.

"If you want my opinion," said that associate, "I say no. He looks like the king of the horsethieves to me."

"Thanks for the boost, mister," said the Ranger.

The man with the bald spot shrugged. He would not rise to bait, and his attitude was hopeless so far as Hatfield went. Pallette shook his head.

"Sorry, big feller," he said. "Season's slack. Try me in the fall."

Hatfield waved a hand, turned the sorrel, and rode around the house.

"Dog it, Vale!" he heard Big Ed Pallette burst out. "That's a good man yuh

made me leave go! These cusses you fetched in are the laziest set of dogs I ever hope to—"

Hard eyes were watching from the shade by the bunkhouse and barn, and Hatfield could not linger too long to overhear what was being said around the corner. None of Five-Finger Henny's gang was about the E P. They were still holding the fort at Garrett's, no doubt.

"Vale has a lot of say with Pallete, but Pallette don't seem to like it too much," Hatfield mused, as he took a trail away from the big ranch, and headed straight for the town.

THERE wasn't too much to Vanceville. It was a cowtown, serving the ranches of the surrounding country. Like most towns of the Southwest it had a central plaza, planted with live-oaks and other trees, and about this were important buildings such as the city hall and jail. Wooden buildings lined the dusty streets, and Vanceville had more than its quota of saloons. One, the largest and most ornate was the Golden Horns. A gilded set of longhorns overhung the sign over the front door.

It was suppertime, and the Ranger dropped Goldy's reins over the hitch-rack, ducked under it, and went to the bar. Men were in there, drinking. Hatfield had a couple, then went next door to the Texas Lunch, where he ordered ham and eggs, coffee, and apple pie.

Dark fell, as he ate his meal and then rolled a smoke.

Sitting by the front window of the restaurant, drinking his sixth cup of coffee, the Ranger saw Big Ed Pallete and Barney Vale ride up, dismount, and go into the Golden Horns.

They were worth watching, he thought. Warden and the Garretts suspected them of having killed Lew Garrett. Here was a good chance to do a little checking up, so Hatfield paid his bill and went out. When he entered the Golden Horn he was in time to see Vale and Pallette pass through the main bar and enter a hallway at the rear.

After a time, the Ranger went around to the back street. He soon discovered the two men, seated in one of the private rooms in the rear of the place. He wanted to get closer. The snatch of talk he had caught, with Big Ed Pallette complaining of Vale's hold over him, had been tantalizing. He would like to sit in on more conversation between those two.

The open window was on a passage between streets. He edged over, trying to get where he could hear what was being said inside.

A low, metallic *cluck-cluck* made him whirl, and drop to the ground instantly.

"Reach!"

A bullet sang over the Ranger's dropping head. A breath later he had made a snap draw and fired into the dark figure of a gunman who was almost upon him.

But this was not the only man near him. The next instant, in the dim darkness, he made out more men, drawn in his direction by the hubbub. Bodyguards to Vale and Pallette the Ranger believed.

The horse-faced rancher and his companion, inside the private room, leaped up and, drawing guns, rushed to the window. But Hatfield was already streaking toward the sidewalk. Glancing back, he saw men looming in the shaft of light from the open window at which Vale and Pallette stood.

A bullet whizzed near, but he turned the corner, making the front veranda of the saloon. There he paused. Inside, customers were crowding about the bar, and a piano and fiddle were being tortured. Dancers in the side pavilion were shaking the walls and floors as they pranced around.

The Ranger went through the batwings and unobtrusively found a place at the bar. Soon he had a drink. Men were busy with their own devices and in the general confusion had not noticed him.

Big Ed Pallette appeared from the rear, walking fast, followed by two plug-uglies with drawn Colts. The shots which had been fired had attracted little attention, for hilarious cowboys often fired their revolvers into the air in sheer exuberance.

As Pallette and his men passed through the saloon, a lean, weathered fellow with a faded, string mustache, got up from a poker game and intercepted the rancher near where the Ranger slouched in the crowd at the bar.

"What's wrong, Ed?" demanded the oldish man. Hatfield took note of his worn black pants and run-over boots. "Yuh ain't s'posed to wave guns in here." As he turned a little, Hatfield saw the sheriff's star pinned to the brown vest.

"Oh, hullo, Craig," said Pallette, pausing as the officer seized his arm. "A drygulcher just tried for Barney Vale and me through the back winder. We're after

him. He run into the street."

"So he's Sheriff Al Craig," mused the Ranger.

Craig had an honest though defeated look. He was a plodder, decided Hatfield, as Craig, his mental processes none too quick, bit at his mustache. Finally he nodded.

"All right," he said wearily. "I'll help yuh hunt him. Come on."

ALL the searchers rushed outside, splitting up and down the sidewalk, looking for Hatfield, who enjoyed his drink and then had a second, until the chagrined Pallette, Craig and the rest came back and returned to their own pursuits. When Pallette passed, Hatfield was turned away, his head down, and the tall rancher did not notice him.

A sour, faraway expression was on Pallette's horse face. He seemed to be discussing something unpleasant, most of the time, with some imaginary opponent.

"Austin next," thought Hatfield. "I got to check up on the Land Office records myself, before I go farther."

He had learned what he could in his quick survey, and had many matters to think over. The capital, with its great array of official records representing every square foot in the huge state, called him.

The Garretts were not the sort of folks who would fight the law, and lie. Hatfield was convinced they had been terribly wronged. The Ranger also had decided that Barney Vale was a fishy customer, and he knew that Big Ed Pallette was thick with Vale. As for Sheriff Craig, the lawman might be either a paid or deluded tool of the two. It would not be the first time such officials had been bought by big cowmen.

When all was quiet, Hatfield left the Golden Horns, picked up Goldy, and rode out of Vanceville, taking the trail to Austin. Around midnight, he pulled off the beaten way and camped, to sleep.

When the tall Ranger entered Captain Bill McDowell's office the next morning—a bright, sunny day—the old Ranger captain looked up in surprise.

"Yuh made it there and back mighty fast," he growled. "Well?"

Hatfield sank into the chair by Cap'n Bill's desk.

"The Garretts got a raw deal, I reckon," he reported. "They lost their land and Lew Garrett was killed—shot down when he tried to do some detective work on his own. Big Ed Pallette, owner of the E P, and a land shark named Barney Vale are mighty busy over there, Cap'n."

"Barney Vale?" repeated McDowell, his frosty brows joined in a scowl. "Why, he's got an office right across from the courthouse, around the corner from the General Land Office!"

Hatfield vigorously nodded assent.

"I got to try and check up at the Land Office. Yuh reckon it would be possible for anybody to steal or switch records there?"

McDowell stared at the blank wall as he thought that over. His gnarled fingers, stiff with his age, drummed on the blotter. At last he looked into the Ranger's gray-green eyes.

"Might be," he muttered. "See here, Jim, I got another one for yuh, like the Garrett business. Come in the mail this mornin', from Kimble County—west of Gillespie, which Vanceville sets in."

He passed the letter to Hatfield who read the painful scrawl which informed:

Sir, Capt. Tex. Rangers. My ranch has bin tuk from me Sherif Lynes says legal like. But I file when I settle 15 yrs. bak. Now Larsen of Tri. 3 brand he adds to Tri. 3. I fite but posse chase me off. Wil Rangers let this hapen?
John Porter

"Sounds like the same sort of game," commented the Ranger. "As soon as I finish in town, I'll run over and talk to John Porter."

"*Bueno.* He's asked Ranger help—and we never refuse an appeal from a good citizen. I smell something mighty rotten. We got to dig it out and clean things up."

Hatfield left Cap'n Bill and rode slowly up the street on the golden sorrel, admiring anew this town which he had adopted as his own—as much as he had any town or city. Old Austin drowsed on the north bank of the Colorado River, safe enough on its bluffs from high water when the river flooded.

The roads were dusty now, in the summer heat. Men sought the shade of the sun awnings, or kept quiet in the saloons, till the noonday passed.

Wooden frame buildings, stores, homes, more pretentious brick and stone edifices made up Austin, named for the father of Texas. There was talk of a new big capitol building for Texas, for the machinery of government was growing more complex in the huge State. But Jim Hatfield loved it as it was.

. . A great town, Austin, and a great State —Texas.

CHAPTER VI

Land Office

WHEN Hatfield had first heard Barney Vale's name, it had struck a familiar cord in his mind. Now he was looking for the man's office, and the board sign, hanging in front of a place not far from the courthouse, which would point out Vale's place of business.

He knew that he had seen the land agent's shingle, but was not too familiar with the business places here in the capital, since his work kept him out of town a great deal of the time. Anyway he usually avoided cities as far as possible, preferring the freedom of the wilds.

Finally the sign loomed up ahead of him. It read:

BARNEY VALE
LAND TITLES A SPECIALTY
RANCH & FARM LANDS FOR SALE

From his saddle, Hatfield could see through a plate-glass window into the office. A clerk was seated on a stool before a high, slanting desk, writing in a ledger. There was no sign of Vale, but the Ranger had not expected there would be. Hatfield had made a quick run back to Austin, and he doubted if Vale had yet reached town. Probably the land shark was still at Pallette's ranch.

Vale's place was by no means the largest land office in sight. The General Land Office dominated the neighborhood. It stood on a steep hill around the corner from the courthouse. Its thick stone walls looked ancient, venerable—as it should. For the structure was a replica of a medieval European castle.

Leaving Goldy in the shade, Hatfield climbed the stone steps and entered the building. It was cool inside, rather dim, and the air had a papery, musty odor. Offices opened from a central hall. He went to the file room which was marked by a plain painted sign, his spurs clinking softly.

A single door led into the file room which was large, and built much like a vast vault. On shelves reaching to the ceiling and in myriad cubbyholes were millions of records, archives, title deeds, patents, transfers and other legal documents having to do with the ownership of all lands in Texas. The individual files were in paper folders, and listed according to system.

Three clerks were behind a counter, and a slim young man with reddish hair and a thin face was sweeping the floor. At long tables in the space allotted to investigators sat three or four oldish men, in plain clothing. The Ranger recognized a couple of them as Austin attorneys. No doubt, they were studying and searching titles for clients.

Hatfield paused in the doorway as he took in the studious, quiet scene. It did not seem possible that outlawry would dare invade this staid and legal domain.

The youth with the red hair reminded Hatfield of someone he had seen recently. Then he had it.

"Dollars to doughnuts that's Frank Garrett!" he thought. "And he's got a job here, like he hoped he would."

One of the men behind the counter sat at a desk marked "Chief Clerk." He was a small fellow, with a shiny bald pate and sagging cheeks, caused by missing teeth.

Hatfield stepped over to the nearest of the clerks who went on leisurely with what he was doing, writing slowly in a big ledger, engrossed in his task. Hatfield had to rap twice before the man looked up, rather impatiently.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I'd like to see a couple of files, mister," murmured Hatfield.

The clerk rose and came to him, frowning.

"Yuh see about a million. What numbers yuh want?"

"I ain't shore. I'm interested in Gillespie and Kimble Counties, though. Say the properties of Edward Pallette, of the E P brand, and Larsen of the Triangle Three."

"Yuh're shore green, ain't yuh?" said the clerk, with a veteran's contempt for the uninitiated. "Well, I'm a busy man, but I'll give yuh a hand. First we'll hunt it up in the alphabetical lists and see what files yuh want." He had the average public official's ill-concealed scorn for members of the body politic whose servant he was supposed to be.

"Mighty white of yuh to bother with me, mister," drawled the Ranger. "Yuh savvy a lot more'n I do."

"Naturally." The flattery mollified the clerk and he melted a bit, missing the soft sarcasm.

The red-haired sweeper had paused when he heard the inquiry about the E P. He stared at Hatfield, who was more sure than ever now that the lad was Frank, Sue Garrett's brother.

THE clerk hunted up file numbers. He disappeared into the musty stacks, as Hatfield leaned on the counter. Young Garrett watched the tall man curiously.

Hatfield knew that he was on unfamiliar ground. Land titles and such were complicated and it took long experience to understand the problems. But he was seeking an answer to the terrible mystery which had struck the Texas range, and he meant to learn all he could.

The clerk brought various records in paper wrappers.

"Yuh can take these to the table and study 'em, but don't remove 'em from the office," said the clerk, self-importantly.

"Thanks a-mighty."

The Ranger went to a vacant table and sat down. The rough processes of land ownership were known to Hatfield, but he quickly learned that it took an expert to know exactly what was required in proving a title at law. There were many entries in the long records, sales, new owners, complex procedures which must be traced.

He felt decidedly at sea. But after a time he was able to locate lines recording Ed Pallette's title deeds.

"Well, dog my hide!" he murmured.

Pallette held a great sweep of land across Gillespie, but the record showed it was jointly owned by Barney Vale. If anything happened to one or the other owner, the survivor became sole holder!

"Pallette and Vale seem to be close pardners," he thought. "Or mebbe Pallette don't savvy this."

The Ranger kept on searching, but was unable to turn up the slightest evidence to show that Lewis Garrett had ever held any land in the district.

It was puzzling. He tried another file which the clerk searched out for him. It contained what seemed to be ironclad records proving that Benjamin Larsen of the Triangle 3—and here a new name, Samuel Ince, entered the perplexing picture—owned with Ince a large chunk of Kimble County.

John Porter, whose pitiful complaint had reached McDowell, did not appear in the records. If Garrett and Porter had actually been owners of Texas ground, their deeds would have been recorded and properly filed at the Land Office. But if there had been errors of filing, then the tracts would class as unappropriated public domain, open to location. Hatfield was aware that title defects could wreck a claim.

"Garrett and Porter may have been careless in how they registered," he thought.

As for old Possum Ransom, such a squatter had not a leg to stand on. He had not filed, and, as land increased in value, others coveted it, and it was vital to hold a clean title.

"Wonder who Samuel Ince is?" Hatfield asked himself.

It seemed to him something more than coincidence that this Ince should be on the file with Larsen, in the same capacity as Vale with Pallette.

He studied the papers on which the records were inscribed and thought it seemed old enough for the dates. And the phrasing was stiff, and sounded quite legal. Hatfield was no lawyer, to find flaws, but he doubted if there were any. Even the ink was black, well-dried.

Such a man as Barney Vale, he thought, might seize opportunities to shove out small holders of land, who had filed improperly. But Vale would be way ahead of him, knowing every wrinkle, every necessary twist to cinch ownership in a court. It took years of intense study to grow familiar with the complexities of the Land Office.

Hatfield found that he had spent over an hour studying the files. The air was stale, musty in there. He returned the files and went out into the street. The fresh air, hot as it was, smelled delicious after the confined atmosphere of the Land Office.

The Ranger had a drink, then went to McDowell's office.

"Find anything?" inquired the old Captain.

"I don't know, suh. I savvy one thing, though. It takes a real expert to understand all the wrinkles at that place."

"Barney Vale's been around Texas a long while," observed Captain Bill. "Such an hombre has vast knowledge of how to locate surveys, and how to smell out defects in a title."

"Right," agreed Jim Hatfield. "And it

looks to me like Vale has fixed hisself up fine. He's joint owner of Pallette's E P. Looks like him and Pallette are in thick together on a big deal." Hatfield spoke morosely, for he was finding difficulty in getting started on the case. He could not yet see the road ahead. "I better head for Kimble County, Cap'n, and talk to John Porter, check up on Larsen's Triangle Three, and some hombre who's joint owner with Larsen, name of Sam Ince."

The Ranger took his leave of McDowell and once more set out westward. The roads he followed were of dirt. When he had left the city behind, they petered out. They were fit enough for horses, but carts had rutted the soil and there was no real highway for wheeled vehicles.

He had plenty to think about, as he tried to figure out the puzzles he had encountered at the Land Office. . . .

IN THE evening, two days later, Hatfield located John Porter at the address given in Porter's letter to the Rangers. Porter was a thick-set, middle-aged Texan. He was working on a ranch not far from the little settlement of Beansboro, in Kimble County.

Porter had ridden up to the boarding-house where Hatfield was staying for Porter wanted to be near his daughters, who were working in the town. The Ranger had been waiting for him. Hatfield had told Porter that McDowell had asked him to check up on the complaint the Rangers had received.

Porter accompanied Hatfield to a nearby saloon, and over drinks it was easy to start the rancher talking. The Ranger wanted to know all there was to know about the man.

John Porter, he learned, was a widower, with three grown girls. His children had helped on the little ranch, several miles from Beansboro, until they had been dispossessed by Sheriff Lynes and a posse. Then the girls had gone to work as waitresses in the settlement.

Porter had a deep sense of grievance, as well he might have. For he was a plodding, peaceful citizen.

"I'm no gunslinger," he told Hatfield, "and Sheriff Lynes said this Sam Ince and Ben Larsen of the Triangle Three had me on the fork and over the fire toastin'. I asked a friend of mine in town who does some law work about it. He told me I couldn't win, and I ain't got the money to hire lawyers and take it through the courts anyways. I was licked before I begun."

"Is this Sheriff Lynes honest?" asked the Ranger.

"Far as I savvy. He seemed to feel sorry for us, but said he had to carry out the law."

"Yuh shore yuh filed proper-like on yore land?"

"Positive, mister. I'd swear to it if it cost me my neck. But things were all wrong in Austin at the Land Office, 'cordin' to what I learned."

"And this here Ince? Yuh say him and Larsen took yore place?"

"Yeah. Ince was a stranger. He come here when they started makin' me all that trouble. He seems to be in cahoots with Larsen, who was mighty glad to see me go. I had some fences which bothered the Triangle Three. I savvy that Larsen claimed some squatter land, too, and run folks off that was on it."

The situation was parallel to that in Gillespie County. But unlike Lew Garrett, Porter had not tried to buck the enemy, and perhaps had saved his life by accepting the injustice.

"I'll be headin' for Austin soon, Porter, and I'll shore tell McDowell how things stand here," promised Hatfield. "Meanwhile, make no move, savvy? Make out like yuh've swallered it and are satisfied."

"Aw right," said Porter and, as he glanced up, he suddenly caught the Ranger's arm. "Say, there's Larsen now!"

Hatfield turned to look at the tall, tow-headed man in leather and big Stetson who swaggered into the saloon. Ben Larsen, owner of the Triangle Three, a big spread, wore a mustache and clipped beard of light hue like his ropy hair.

"Drinks are on the Triangle Three, gents!" he roared. "Step up!"

"That's Sam Ince with him," growled Porter.

Ince was a shorter, heavier man. He wore a rusty black and a hand hat. He had a fleshy face that was blue around the jowls, and his eyes were too small and too closely set together.

"I'll go over and have a look-see," the Ranger told Porter. "Remember what I said—keep yore temper and don't go off half-cocked. Yuh'll hear further from the Rangers, savvy?"

For John Porter, at sight of the men who had snatched away the little home he had worked for, had grown as red as fire.

His fists clenched, and he scowled at Ben Larsen and Sam Ince.

"All right," he choked to the Ranger. "I'll keep my trap shut. But I can't stand the smell of 'em. See yuh again."

John Porter jumped up and hurried outside.

HATFIELD pushed to the bar, to take advantage of the rancher's offer to free drinks. He managed to edge in close to Larsen and Ince where he could listen to what they said.

Ince, the pig-faced man, was apparently about to take his leave, for a time, anyway.

'I've got to start, Larsen," he was saying. "See you in a few days."

"Right, right." Larsen was grinning. He was in an expansive mood. "Here's to luck! Everything's worked out plumb fine."

Ince had several drinks before he shook hands with Larsen and stalked out. His step was unsteady by that time, for he was filled with red-eye. His saddled horse waited with reins over the long rail. Ince managed to mount, and started away.

Hatfield followed, at a safe distance. He wanted to know where Ince was going.

In the darkness, the Ranger could sniff the freshly risen dust kicked up by Ince's plodding horse. Ince was half numb from the liquor he had consumed, and as his mustang climbed a hill, the stubby figure was framed against the moon. Ince had no suspicion that he was followed.

CHAPTER VII

Tiger Bait

IT WAS nearly midnight when Sam Ince rode up to Big Ed Pallette's ranchhouse, dropped his reins, and walked stiffly toward the front. There was a lamp burning in the main room, and Ince entered.

Hatfield stealing through the shadows, came up under an open window. Barney Vale sat in the big room. Pallette was there, too, but Big Ed was slumped, snoring, in a chair. An empty bottle was at his limp hand which sagged to the floor.

Ince glanced at Palette as he blinked in the yellow light.

"He's out completely," growled Barney Vale. His eyes glowed. He had been drinking, but he held his liquor well. "Everything all right over there, Ince?"

"Yes, suh. John Porter made no trouble to speak of, and we run off the squatters. I got held up, though, by them Olsen brothers. They opened fire on Lynes' posse and we had quite a chase. Wounded one and run 'em into the chaparral."

"The fools! They've got no chance."

"That's what we told 'em but they're hot-headed cusses. Yuh want me to move on west?"

"Wait a while," said Vale. "I'll tell you when. There's a job here in Gillespie. I've been puttin' it off, but it's got to be done."

"Yuh mean Tate's?" Ince blinked harder.

"That's it. The Garretts are there. But we've got to clear the place out. I may use you. It'll be up to that old fool Al Craig this time."

"And you?" asked Ince. "You stickin' here?"

Vale shook his head. He looked sinister as he crouched in his chair.

"I'm going to Austin for a few days," he said. "Then I'll be back. Let you know in the morning what to do."

"That suits me," Sam Ince answered as he yawned. "I'm plumb wore out, boss. Reckon I'll turn in."

Ince walked through to the interior of the great house.

Barney Vale sat still, staring at the opposite wall. His eyes had a cold marble-like glint. He reached out, poured himself several fingers of whisky, downed it at a gulp. . . .

In the bright morning, on the run to Austin ahead of Barney Vale, Jim Hatfield had been riding some hours when he lifted his head and sniffed at the risen dust before him. He could see a long, rolling cloud of the reddish stuff hanging in the quiet air, moving slowly eastward toward the capital.

"Trail herd, Goldy," he murmured to the sorrel.

The signs he had already cut were as plain as a printed page to him—the chopped earth, the hoofmarks of longhorn cattle, and of horses ridden by the drovers. The crisscrossing, snakelike marks off to one side showed where the chuckwagon had passed, driven by cookie.

Those cattle were being driven to Austin, Hatfield knew, for the capital was an important market for livestock, as well as

for cotton, grain and wool. It was the principal trade and jobbing center for central Texas. Cattle herds were often driven to the city, and it was no surprise to cut such a trail. With such a slow party, though, it would be another day before they finished the drive.

Coming up the next rise, Hatfield could see the drag riders moving in dense dust. Now and then it shut them off from his vision. The wagon had gone on ahead to the next bedding-ground.

Hatfield observed his usual caution in catching up with the cattle drive. Not only for his own sake, but he did not wish to start a stampede, as trail cattle were apt to prove spooky.

A small bunch of big steers broke off from one side of the herd, and a flanker spurted out to head them back into line. The longhorns came close enough so the Ranger was able to make out the brand. It was a Lazy J—and Hatfield nodded his satisfaction, for he knew the outfit and its owner, Jake Jervis. The ranch lay east of the Pecos, near the Edwards Plateau, and was a large one.

The previous year, the Ranger had smashed an outlaw gang which had been preying on Jervis and others near the Pecos. Now Jervis was a sworn friend of Hatfield and of the Texas Rangers.

Jim Hatfield rode nearer now, and waved to the dragmen. One of them recognized him, and pointed up ahead.

"Boss is up at point," he signaled.

Hatfield allowed plenty of room and moved so as not to alarm the steers, plodding toward their fate—beefsteaks for the tables of city homes and restaurants.

When he rode up to the front of the long procession, he had his bandanna raised to sift some of the dust. He still was coughing and sniffling from the clinging, powdery stuff that clung to his throat and nostrils.

JAKE JERVIS waved and grinned at him. The Ranger joined the owner of the herd.

Jervis was a tall, light-haired Texan, of about forty. He had lobster-red skin, and a loud voice. He was glad to see Hatfield, profane in his cheery greeting.

"You old seacook!" he cried. 'I was hopin' I'd run into yuh. Here, have a swig as a starter."

He passed over a flask of whisky, and the Ranger took a drink.

Jervis drank also, and smacked his lips.

"Whew! Been a dusty drive. Rivers are down, though—that's a comfort. Ain't had any bad swims."

"How are things at the Lazy J?" asked the Ranger.

"Fine, fine," replied Jervis. "In the pink, as them English fellers say, and gettin' redder all the time. You chasin' bandits?"

"I'm tryin' to make shore just what I am chasin this time," Hatfield said drily. "By the way, yuh havin' any squatter trouble, Jake?"

Jervis swore with sulphurous, picturesque phrases.

"Cuss 'em! Always squatters, movin' in on a man. Shore I've got trouble with 'em. Who ain't—in this business?"

The Ranger rode for a time at point with the boss of the Lazy J. Business was good, the price of beef was up, and Jervis had just become the proud father of twin boys.

"I've got to be moseyin' on, Jake," Hatfield finally said. "I've got business, and yuh're movin' a little too slow for me. Where yuh stoppin' in town?"

"At the Drovers' Inn, of course. And if yuh don't drop in and help me drink the bar dry, I'll never forgive the Rangers!"

The germ of an idea had struck Hatfield, as he paused a moment, just before he gave Goldy his head. "Ever act as tiger bait, Jake?" he asked.

"Huh?" Jervis's good-humored red face went blank. "What's the game, Ranger?"

"I might ask yuh to give me a hand in Austin, if things work out like I'm hopin'."

"Say, any time, any time at all," Jervis said heartily. "You savvy that. Don't forget, now—at the Drovers', and we'll be in by tomorrer night."

Late that afternoon, Captain Bill McDowell listened to Hatfield's report on the complaint from John Porter.

"And now?" inquired McDowell, brows knitted.

"Barney Vale's on his way to Austin, Cap'n," informed the tall Ranger. "I'm goin' after him, though I ain't shore yet just how he's workin' his game."

"All right." There was a keen light in McDowell's blue eyes. He licked his cracked lips, as though in anticipation. "I can't ride far, mebbe, Hatfield, but if it comes to it, here in Austin—well, I ain't had any real sport for a long time."

He opened the drawer under his hand and drew forth his Colt .45 Frontier Model pistol. It was well-oiled and in perfect

shape, and McDowell ran his hand along it proudly.

"I want to be in on anything that breaks loose in town, savvy?" he said. "That is, if it ain't hamperin' you."

Hatfield smiled.

"Shore," he said, for he knew the pent-up emotions of the old warhorse, Bill McDowell, chained to his desk by the infirmities consequent on long decades of life. . . .

Barney Vale, accompanied by several riders, reached town after dark that night. He went to his office for a time, then repaired to a hotel to eat and drink. Hatfield observed the land agent from a distance. He did not wish to alarm Vale.

The stout agent worked at his office the following day. In the afternoon, Jake Jervis, trailed by some of his men, arrived at the Drover's Inn. The cows had been penned on the outskirts of the city, and Jervis, his long run ended, was ready for sport.

The Ranger did not immediately seek out the rancher, who was his staunch friend, but waited, giving Jervis time to eat and have a few drinks before sending a note into him by a boy. On reading it, Jervis left his own companions and came to the rear of the inn. He found Hatfield awaiting him in a small private room. A bottle and glasses were on the table there.

"Drink up, Jake," invited the Ranger. "I want to talk."

"Well, why all the mystery? Yuh ashamed to be seen with me in public?" Jervis grinned. "Here, the cigars are on me—for the twins. I had to wait till I hit town to buy enough to go around."

OVER THE cigars and whisky, Hatfield broached the subject he had in mind.

"I'm on the trail of a land shark named Barney Vale," he explained. "He has an office here but he's operatin' west of Austin at the moment. He's hoggin' big stretches, and runnin' off small landholders and squatters. It looks legal—on paper I believe Vale's a thief and worse, but I've got to prove it to the hilt. You can help us."

"Anything at all," said Jervis. "I said that, and I mean it, Ranger!"

"In the mornin' then"—Hatfield became businesslike—"send a message to Vale that yuh want to talk with him. Make it here in this room. I'll be behind that closet door, where I can get a look and listen. I need to make shore how Vale works, savvy? Be friendly wth Vale. Tell him yuh heard from a pard of Big Ed Pallette's—he owns the E P in Gillespie County—that Vale might be able to give yuh a hand. Yuh got plenty troubles. Squatters and settlers have fenced in yore water and cut off yore range and yuh want 'em cleaned off, yuh don't care how. If Vale asks for money, give him this hundred dollars to start."

Jervis pushed away the roll which Hatfield offered.

"I'll put up the stake myself if necessary," he said, his jaw set with determination. . . .

Barney Vale stepped into the private room at the Drovers' Inn.

"You're Jake Jervis?" he said to the man who was waiting there.

"Yes, suh. Take it yuh're Barney Vale?" Jervis was friendly, pleasant. "Sit down and take the load off yore feet. Have a drink."

Inside the closet, Hatfield sat on a soap box, his eye to a crack. He could see Vale's stout figure and the man's cruel face. As Vale removed his hat and sat down opposite Jervis, the bald spot gleamed in the sunlight coming through the window. The agent's violet eyes were fixed on Jervis's lobster-red face, as Vale studied the rancher.

Jervis did a good job. He poured a drink for Vale and himself, offered two cigars, one for each twin. He swore in his hearty fashion, and began his tale of woe.

"Run into Marty Dugan a while back, Vale," he said. "I was tellin' him what a fuss I had with all-fired farmers and small-timers comin' in on my range."

"You own the Lazy J," said Vale. "I know the property."

So he had looked Vale up, thought Hatfield, and was glad he had picked a bona-fide candidate to draw out the land shark.

A shadow touched the wall outside the room, the elongated shadow of a Stetson, the vague outline of a man's body. Hatfield was not surprised. Vale seldom took chances. He had a bodyguard, wherever he moved.

"That's right," Jervis was saying. "Dugan's a friend of Ed Pallette's, and when I was cussin' squatters and all, Dugan said he'd heard that the E P had had the same trouble and that mebbe you could help me out. I'm willin' to pay, of course. I can't run the cows I did, with my water bein' cut off by fences and all."

"You have the same problem as most big cowmen, Jervis." Vale replied. "You can't possibly buy up all the range you need, and these little fellows take up title and wreck you. Yes, you came to the right man. I'll need some details—and a deposit, of course, say one hundred and fifty dollars."

The roll which Jervis instantly pulled from his pocket was large enough to choke a bull. It made Vale regretful he had not asked for more. Jarvis peeled off three fifties. He held the money in his hand as he spoke.

"How you aim to clean off them skunks, Vale?" he asked. "I savvy for a fact that a couple got legal titles to the chunks of land they're livin' on."

"Which ones?" Vale asked quickly.

"Well, Greene Tillsbury, for one, and for another, a Mexican named Diaz."

Vale made notes.

"Don't worry about it any more, Jervis," he said expansively. "I'll see to everything for you."

Jervis was reluctant to pass over the cash deposit. He frowned.

"How do I know yuh'll be able to?" he asked. "I don't see how yuh can hope to bust their holds on their property."

Vale shrugged. His eyes were cold.

"I'll guarantee you satisfaction or your money back, Jervis. As to how I'll handle it, that's my business. I have influence, though. I'll say that."

Hatfield watched the scene as the rancher drew Vale out, doing a fine job of acting. Jervis feigned to be convinced against his will, and gave Vale the money.

"I'll go over the matter as soon as possible," Vale said. "I've been mighty busy lately. I'll let you know what the job will cost in the long run. Wait till you hear from me, before you take any further action, understand?"

"I savvy. Thanks a mighty." Jervis acted relieved.

CHAPTER VIII

Cornered

VALE had another drink, then rose, shook hands, and departed. The shadow of the sentry on the wall outside left with the land shark.

Most thieves, thought Hatfield, had a system. It worked once, twice, and they counted on it working indefinitely. He hoped Barney Vale would follow the rule, and so give some idea of his mode of operation.

He took his leave of Jake Jervis, and left the Drovers' Inn by a rear door.

That afternoon, he watched Barney Vale climb the stone stairs to the General Land Office. Two armed men were tagging along with Vale. They were the same two men the Ranger had seen at the E P when he had been eavesdropping at Pallette's ranchhouse. The bodyguards went inside with Vale, and Hatfield moved around to a side entry, keeping out of their sight as they entered the file room.

Frank Garrett was inside, sorting papers at a desk. The chief clerk and the other workers were occupied with routine matters. Vale went to the counter, asked for a file. Hatfield was sure he had asked for a file of the county in which Jervis's Lazy J lay.

Garrett was dog-eyeing Vale, whom he knew, and Vale did not fail to recognize the young man. But the land shark kept his aplomb. He took the file folder, went to a table and sat down, studying it for a time. Young Garrett kept watching Vale steadily.

"Cuss it, Garrett's wreckin' Vale's game —and mine, too," thought the Ranger. "Vale couldn't do anything if he meant to, with Garrett spyin'."

The young waddy was a rank amateur at such work. And he could not help showing that hatred for Vale, who had helped take his father's ranch, and who was suspected of killing Lew Garrett, burned in his heart.

After a while, Vale returned the file, and left. He went back to his office. He had made some notes as he read, but had done nothing illegal.

The patient Ranger bided his time, observing Barney Vale. Such work was often tiresome, but it was also necessary. Vale kept busy in his office for a while, then went out to eat, but soon returned. A client or two came and went.

From the high window of a small saloon across the way, Hatfield saw a hurrying figure reach Vale's office and rush inside. Barney Vale was at a large desk by his window. Hatfield, craning his neck, saw that Vale had been given a letter, which the land agent read, then crunched up and threw to the floor as he leaped to his feet.

Vale started to leave, but went back, picked up the letter, and stuffed it in a pocket. Apparently he was greatly disturbed.

The sun was nearly gone, the shadows long over Austin when Barney Vale, tagged by his guards, went up the sidewalk, and turned into a restaurant. As he ate his dinner there, dark fell over Austin.

Yellow glows came from the windows of buildings as oil lamps were lighted in the city. Tired workers were repairing to their homes or to the bars and other places of amusement. All houses looked cozy after dark, mused the Ranger, as he lurked across the road, waiting for Vale to come out of the restaurant.

But Vale, seated at a round table in the barroom restaurant, appeared to be in no hurry to leave. He was drinking with his friends. Hatfield had time to snatch a sandwich and a drink nearby. Through the window of the place he could watch the building where Vale sat at a table.

Finally Vale decided to return to his office, and the armed men went with him. As Vale lighted a lamp on his desk, a tower clock slowly chimed ten.

People in their houses were beginning to turn in, although there were plenty of celebrants in saloons and other spots who had no such intention. Hatfield stood leaning wearily against a brick wall in a recess across the road. The lamp in Vale's office burned low.

Then he saw the land shark coming from the doorway, and perked up. Shadows marked the bodyguards following their chief, but now there were more than two. At least half a dozen walked in pairs after Barney Vale. Lights from windows glinted on their holstered guns.

This time Vale turned toward the hill on which the Land Office stood. The castle stood out black, with its rococo turrets against the sky.

"He's on his way!" thought the Ranger hopefully. "Mebbe Jervis gave me a real boost!"

HATFIELD was careful. He did not wish to alarm the man he was shadowing. He held back, waiting until all the gang had moved well around the corner. Then he moved, lithely, through the shadows. He paused where he could see the black blobs that were Vale and his men going up the stone steps toward the Land Office.

Suddenly the Ranger tensed, swore under his breath. He saw two more figures pass in the faint shaft from a street light around the corner. He had but a fleeting glimpse, but in that instant saw that one of them was Keith Warden.

"I'll lay anything the other's Frank Garrett!" he thought.

He lost them in the darkness, for they were well ahead, and moving fast. He could not see them on the stairs.

"Warden must have come to Austin to help Frank Garrett buck Barney Vale," he decided. "I've got to warn 'em."

Vale and his cohorts were in deadly earnest. They were killers of the most brutal variety. And the Ranger knew that if he had spied the two young waddies dogging the land agent that there was an excellent chance that Vale's keen-eyed, suspicious gunnies had also glimpsed the pair.

Hatfield did not see Garrett and Warden on the main stairs to the Land Office. The Ranger waited, but was unable to pick out their shadowy forms.

He began to circle toward the shadowed side of the steep hill. He was worried about Warden and Garrett. He liked Keith Warden, knew how much the cowboy meant to Sue Garrett, and Frank's mother had had enough to bear, without losing her only son.

The Ranger peered into the blackness, and swept the pale moonlit areas.

The warm summer night was fraught with weighted danger. It was like waiting for some buried, murderous explosive to go off, and Hatfield did not know just where that would occur. . . .

Keith Warden lay flat on his stomach. Within a ward of him was Sue's brother, Frank, the slim, red-haired young cowboy who had come to the capital in a desperate effort to retrieve the fortunes of the family, land which had been wrested from them.

Warden felt Frank's light touch on his wrist. He moved his head closed to Garrett's lips.

"Can yuh see 'em?" Frank breathed.

"No. They're up there, though."

"Want to catch Vale right in the act, inside the file room," muttered Frank. "Let's creep a bit nearer."

They inched up the slope. Warden's body was scraped by gravel, dug into by protruding rocks. In order to crawl noiselessly, the young fellows had taken off their heavy boots, and left their cartridge

belts behind. But each had a Colt six-shooter, with some spare shells they had thrust into the pockets of their trousers.

As Ranger Hatfield had surmised, Keith Warden had come to Austin to aid Garrett. Frank had written him, asking him to hurry to the capital, in the hope of trapping and arresting Barney Vale.

Young Garrett, employed at the Land Office, had rented a small furnished room on the north side of town. The landlady had agreed to let Frank's friend stay with him for a time. With Barney Vale in town, Frank could not work all day and watch his enemy all night, so Warden had slept while Frank was at the office.

Barney Vale had visited the Land Office that afternoon, and studied two files in the file room, as the system permitted anyone to do. Frank Garrett had watched the land shark, and he had had a hunch that Vale meant to return after dark.

Keith Warden had willingly accompanied Frank, and they had followed Vale to the Land Office.

Creeping up the slope, they were but a few yards from the massive, towering walls when they heard a faint metallic click. It was the familiar, recognizable noise made by a squeaky hinge. Garrett gripped Warden's arm in subdued excitement.

"That's Vale! He's got a key to the side door, Keith!"

Frank Garrett was acquainted with the building and the grounds. It was for the purpose of learning the system in use in the Land Office, and figuring out how Barney Vale had managed to steal their ranch, that Frank had taken the job he now held. He expected to be able to expose Vale and regain the Garrett lands, once he had his evidence.

Warden was heart and soul with the Garretts. He was deeply in love with Sue, and looked on Frank as a brother. Besides the injustice he had seen done, he had become personally involved. Vale's men had come within a hair of lynching *him*.

AS A RULE, Keith Warden, like most young fellows, enjoyed excitement, but now as he hugged the warm dirt he felt an unpleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach. He could not glimpse any of the dangerous foes he and Frank had trailed through the streets, so perhaps it was instinct which was warning him. It was hard to keep patient, not to jump up and charge in blindly, no matter what.

After the click of the lock, the opening of the side door, all was silent—too quiet, thought Warden. From below came noises of the city, distant strains of music, voices raised now and then, but the Land Office brooded in majestic stillness on its hilltop.

Frank Garrett was younger than Keith Warden, and he also was reckless by nature. He had the teen-ager's superb belief in himself, certain that though others might die, he was sure to survive. He had not lived long enough, nor did he have sufficient experience to realize that he, too, was only mortal. He knew only that he was excited, wrought up, because at last he was closing in on his foe, Barney Vale.

The dark shadow of the wall cloaked the two young men. There were niches and flagged terraces, plenty of spots around the building which would hide men, they saw, as their young eyes sought to pierce the blackness.

Frank Garrett was slithering along, headed toward the side entrance from which they had caught the noises. Keith followed him. Both men were sure that Vale must be inside the file room by this time.

They were nearly up to the granite flagstones outside the door when a sharp, but low voice suddenly said:

"Freeze where yuh are or I'll drill yuh!"

Warden's heart gave a convulsive leap. He was looking toward the spot from which the command had come, and he saw the gleam of eyes, eyes which no doubt had been watching Frank and himself as they approached.

He sensed other enemies at his right.

"Who is it, Gus?" a hoarse whisper inquired.

"One of 'em's Garrett, the young fool who works in the office. I ain't shore of the other. Lucky I spied the cusses trailin' the boss. Stand up, both of yuh, and watch how you move! Savvy?"

Keith Warden was desperate. He had promised Sue and her mother that he would not let anything happen to Frank, and now he and Frank were both prisoners of Barney Vale's. They knew too much to be spared, and Warden was aware of Vale's ruthlessness.

When Frank had called him to Austin, the idea of trailing and trapping Vale had seemed entirely feasible, and success probable. Now Warden saw what a peri-

lous undertaking it actually was, and the bubble of hope in his heart burst.

There was a violent scrabbling sound close to him. He had been momentarily stunned at being captured and under enemy guns. But now he realized that Frank was rolling off, and he immediately followed.

The Vale man fired hastily. The slug plugged into the ground between the two young fellows. Garrett and Warden let go with their six-shooters, and the pistols flamed in the night. Warden jumped up and ran. Garrett was already running full-tilt along the building. Both shot back as they ran, and four or five of their enemies tried for them.

They raced close to a flagged terrace, with a low parapet running around three sides, the rear being a wall of the Land Office.

"In here!" gasped Garrett, as a bullet shrieked within inches of their heads.

Garrett jumped the barrier, fell flat, and Warden nearly fell. As he slowed in recovering, he was framed against the moonlit sky and something tore at his flesh, shocking him from head to toe. He cried out involuntarily, went down. He was stunned, bruised by the fall to the stones, and was yelling, although he hardly knew it. The world whirled about him as he tried to keep his grip on life. He lay with his legs across the parapet, his breath burning his throat.

Frank hastily pulled him in.

"You hit?" he cried, his voice falsetto with alarm.

"Not—too bad!"

It was difficult to speak.

Slugs spattered at them, as Vale's killers closed in. Garrett tugged at Warden's clothing.

"Roll over here, pronto!" Frank ordered vibrantly. "Keep close to the railin'!"

Determined, vicious enemies drove at them, guns blaring.

CHAPTER IX

The Law's Coming

JIM HATFIELD had circled to the shadowed side of the steep hill and started to climb. He had almost reached the summit when revolvers began to blast away, near the front of the Land Office. Men were cursing, and someone—he thought it sounded like Keith Warden—was yelling in pain.

A dark shadow flashed past, running around the Land Office, but whoever it was did not see him. The man was too intent on whatever he was seeking to accomplish to note the silent, prostrate Ranger.

But with the battle opening, Hatfield had thrown caution to the winds. He had a Colt in his hand, the hammer spur back under his thumb. Jumping up, he charged the remaining yards to the hilltop. As he rushed toward the center of the disturbance, he hoped he was not too late!

Reaching the limit of the black shadows cast by the venerable castle walls, Jim Hatfield checked his speed. He did not like the idea of dashing out into that comparatively light area where the moon's rays touched. The building had many turrets and spires, and there were niches and terraces as well, and men could be in ambush in any one of them.

Guns were flaming not far from the front entrance to the Land Office. Hatfield moved in, seeking to determine just what was going on, though he believed Garrett and Warden had found themselves in hot water all right.

He saw a flagged terrace with a low parapet around three sides, its fourth being a wall. Two pistols were snarling from narrow gaps in the sawtooth rampart of the terrace, as men snugged against the front barrier fought for their lives.

Not more than a dozen paces from where the Ranger paused was a dark figure. Hatfield believed it must be the fellow who had run around the building, past him, a few moments before. The gunslinger's back was to the Ranger, and Vale's aide was protected from the terrace field of fire by the sharp corner behind which he was crouching.

On past the terrace where the two victims were lying, were pillars and bulges in the walls, which gave good cover to other gunhands as they poured lead into the flagged terrace.

There was no doubt now in Hatfield's mind that Keith Warden and Frank Garrett were the victims who were trapped on the terrace. The rest of the banging revolvers must be in the hands of Vale's killers, who were trying to get the embattled waddies.

Warden was shouting at the top of his voice. He was telling the drygulching kil-

lers what he thought of them, and there was real anguish in his tone of voice. Bullets smashed against granite, causing a rain of metal and rock fragments to fly through the air. Those Warden and Garrett sent back shrieked out over the city, or ploughed into the hill.

The Vale gunslinger nearest Hatfield, intent on killing the luckless youths snuggled in the protection of the parapet, had a bright idea. He could not get quite enough elevation to make his shots, but the corner was formed by serrated granite blocks which made a rough ladder, and the marksman began to climb. He needed only to get up a couple of rungs to have a clear bead on the two victims. Holding on with his left hand, his booted toes in the niches, he took careful aim.

At such range it would be sure death and Warden and Garrett were chiefly occupied with the main gang behind the pillars on the other side of them. Plainly the Vale man the Ranger had seen run around the building had meant to catch them here.

"Now or never!" thought Hatfield, and at that moment he recognized the killer. He was Five-Finger Henny, whom the Rangers had encountered at the Garrett spread.

Hatfield raised his thumb from the hammer spur of his steady, well-aimed Colt, and the gun kick was absorbed by the Ranger's palm. Five-Finger Henny, the Vale henchman, flattened against the stone wall. He flexed, gave an unearthly screech, and fell to the earth by the corner.

It saved the two on the terrace, for the moment. Hatfield hastily rushed to check the prostrate killer. He kicked the fellow's gun away from the limp hand, and crouched there.

The din was frightful. It would be heard in the city below, and Austin had city police, marshals who patrolled the streets. They would hurry to the Land Office to see what was going on, but it would take them a few minutes to reach the place.

Vale's followers realized this, too.

"Rush the cusses, boys!" one of them shouted. "They're out of ammunition!"

Dark figures leaped from behind stone pillars, blasting furiously at Garrett and Warden, who fired only one time more apiece. Evidently the killer's estimation of the situation had been correct. They were short of bullets.

THEY would have died in the charge had the Ranger not been there. Hatfield let go with all he had. He hit another Vale gun guard who threw up his hands, fell, then rolled over and came up, to limp away. The others were suddenly aware of the deadly fire from the corner, and they swerved. Rapidy the Ranger pumped .45 slugs at the moving, elusive targets. They tried to cow him by hasty shots, but he was protected by the wall corner. Then they broke and ran back to the cover of the porch pillars.

The Vale men stopped, and Hatfield held his fire. There was a brief lull, and the Ranger heard a gruff voice calling:

"Barney, Barney! Watch it, the law's comin'!"

The warning echoed in the deep recesses of the Land Office.

"Hey, up there, what's goin' on!"

A stentorian shout came from the street below, and a couple of city marshals, guns out, started up the stairs.

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

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Vale's men evaporated. Hatfield glimpsed a scurrying figure as one of them galloped around the far side of the Land Office.

"Warden—Garrett!" called the Ranger. "I'm Jim Hays! Hold yore fire! I'm comin' around the mountain!"

Hatfield ran lightly toward the front entrance. He had to pass the flagged terrace, and there lay Frank Garrett and Keith Warden. Warden knew him, recognized the tall figure in the faint light.

"Jim! How—how'd you come here? Was that you saved our hides just now? No need to tell us not to fire. We're out of bullets!"

Frank Garrett was silent, his thin face pale. Specks of blood showed where flying lead and gravel had cut him. Warden was lying on his side.

"Are yuh hit bad, Warden?" asked Hatfield.

"No. They got me through the left shoulder. Aches now—numbness is workin' out."

"Stay where yuh are," Hatfield said quickly. "The police are comin' and might pick yuh off if yuh move. I'm goin' on and try to round up some of them gunfighters of Vale's."

He flashed on, Colt up, searching for enemies in the shadows. As he reached the first stone pillar looming near the entry, he could see that the front door stood ajar. Behind him, the two marshals had a glimpse of him and yelled to him to halt. As he moved toward the open door, one fired a warning shot which smashed against the pillar and rained fragments down on him.

Hatfield hurried through, kicked the door all the way open and ran inside.

In the dark, spacious hall he could see little, for not much light came in from outside. The file room stood to his right. He heard a sound there, the creak of an unoiled hinge, and started toward the noise, although it was utterly black over there.

A gun flamed and he felt the singe of the heavy bullet past his cheek. He reacted with lightning speed, throwing himself to one knee, returning the fire.

Somebody was running along the corridor toward the rear of the building. Hatfield jumped up, to follow.

He could hear the marshals yelling outside, and the voices of Warden and Garrett calling back.

As he galloped along the corridor to the interior of the big structure, another big chunk of lead missed him by only inches, and he placed the man who shot by the flare from the pistol. He tried to down his man but the hall ahead loomed black. Then as the echoes of the explosions died away, he no longer heard the footsteps.

Gun up, the Ranger came to a turn-off, a side corridor which led to a small door. Heavy bar bolts fastened it, but these had been unlocked. He opened the door, looked out on the side of the Land Office, the dark side of the hill stretching below to the city.

"That was Barney Vale got away, I reckon," he muttered.

He stepped outside, but saw none of his enemies. They had run for it, disappearing in the night.

"You there! Reach, and step out slow!"

The sharp command told him it was one of the Austin policemen, who had started around the building and had spied him as he stood near the door.

"All right Marshal!" he called. "Don't shoot. I'm Ranger Hatfield."

It was an officer he knew, a man named Tim Willis. When Willis recognized the tall Ranger, he swore in amazement.

"What in tarnation's goin' on up here, Hatfield? You savvy who them two young hombres up front are?"

"I can tell yuh all about it, Willis," the Ranger said quickly. "But first, let's hustle down to Barney Vale's office. Them killers might stop there. I'll give yuh the story on the way."

WILLIS hurried with him to meet the other officers who were on their way to the Land Office. En route to Vale's office, Hatfield informed the police that an attempt had been made to enter the file room.

Vale's office and the living quarters behind it were dark. The Ranger and the marshals went inside, guns ready, but the land shark and his men had not come back to their headquarters. A quick search was made through the town, but evidently Vale had taken alarm and fled the city.

Returning to the Land Office, they found that Five-Finger Henny, whom Hatfield had shot at the corner was stiff and cold. The Ranger would never mistake that member of Vale's gang—the Joker. But the joke was on Five-Finger now.

A city marshal was hovering over Keith Warden and Frank Garrett, who had been

taken into the file room. Warden's wound was through the flesh of his upper arm just below the shoulder. It had been roughly dressed and the bleeding had almost stopped. A lamp had been lighted, and on one of the tables stood a pen and a bottle of ink which had been overturned. In the stacks, two paper-wrapped files lay on the floor where they had fallen.

"Any files missin', Garrett?" inquired the Ranger.

"I'll have to check up," Frank told him. Warden had informed Frank that the tall man was a friend, and Frank was aware anyway that Hatfield had saved his life that night.

Young Garrett checked through the files and, after a time, he nodded.

"There's two gone, at least," he said. "One takes in the land near Tate's, but I believe the other, accordin' to the missin' number, would be a lot farther west. Reagan County, mebbe."

"That's north of the Edwards Plateau, ain't it?"

"Yeah, reckon so."

Jake Jervis's Lazy J lay in Reagan, and Hatfield did not doubt but that Barney Vale, the land shark, had come to the Land Office that night to work on the supposed problem which Jervis had posed to Vale at Hatfield's suggestion. The Ranger was uneasy about the other file, though, which contained the records on the section of Gillespie County in which George Tate's ranch and other properties were inscribed.

Hatfield had overheard Vale tell Sam Ince, his aide in the land frauds, that he intended to clear out Tate, and with them the Garretts, who had found refuge with their relatives.

The amateur sleuthing of Frank Garret and Keith Warden had wrecked Hatfield's careful plan to trap Barney Vale and catch him in the act of altering land records. Yet Hatfield could not be too harsh with the young fellows. They had been eager to snare the land shark and had strong personal reasons for doing it.

The Ranger spent the remainder of the night in Austin, for there was nothing more he could do before morning. The police had an alarm out for Vale and his gang, and a careful search was being made. . . .

In the morning, reporting to the keenly interested McDowell, who was chagrined at having missed the fight at the Land Office the night before, Hatfield said:

"Cap'n, I ain't shore where Vale's run to. He's on the prod, though, that's a cinch. He's got a couple of files and mebbe he's headed west, to work on them sections. He won't quit easy. I'll have to get on the rascal's trail."

"Go to it, Hatfield," said Captain Bill. "And don't fergit—if there's any way to do it, let me in on the arrest. I'll see to the warrants here, chargin' Vale with enterin' and tamperin' with files in the Land Office."

CHAPTER X

On The Trail

BEFORE riding out of Austin, on Barney Vale's trail, Hatfield called on Jake Jervis of the Lazy J, his rancher friend who had given him a hand in his attempt to draw Vale out.

In reply to the Ranger's request, Jervis nodded.

"I can make Vanceville on my way home," he said. "It ain't but a few miles out of the way. I'll be pullin' out in a day or two—can hardly wait to see the twins again, the cute critters. But I'll stick with you as long as the Rangers need me, Hatfield."

"*Bueno.* I believe Vale stole the file with the land records of yore district, Jake. He's on the prod, for fair. Somethin's hurried him, and Garrett and Warden have panicked him. I'll either meet yuh or leave a message with the bartender at the Golden Horns in Vanceville, savvy? I may need yuh."

Keith Warden's arm was sore and stiff. It had to have attention, careful dressing, and Warden was living up in Frank Garrett's room. Sue's brother had escaped with scratches and cuts in the desperate battle at the Land Office.

Admonishing them both to be careful, Hatfield rode out of town, westward. He meant to visit Vanceville, and Big Ed Pallette's E P, believing that Vale might head that way.

When he reached Vanceville, however, Barney Vale was not in the town. Discreet inquiry by the Ranger brought him the information that the man he sought had not been seen in Vanceville for days.

"He's mighty tough, and he savvies Warden and Garrett will talk," mused the Ranger, as he fingered his whisky glass in the Golden Horns late that afternoon. "He'll mebbe hide out for a while, at the Epe or some other place, till he's straightened things out to suit himself."

Pallette, the owner of the E P, was Vale's accomplice, whether the horse-faced rancher liked it or not, and Vale would do as he pleased on the ranch.

Hanging around the saloon, Hatfield had decided to step up the road and get supper at the Texas Lunch when he saw Big Ed Pallette ride up, drop his horse's reins over the rack in front of the Golden Horns, and duck under. There were four men—Hatfield recognized them as toughs he had seen when at the E P—tagging after Pallette, and they trailed the rancher inside the saloon. But Barney Vale was not with Pallette.

The cowman went to the bar. His long face was even longer than usual, and he looked miserable, broken in spirit. He hardly replied to the greetings of acquaintances in the saloon. He put down money, and the barkeeper pushed out a bottle and glass. Pallette began to drink, one shot after another, throwing them down fast, his booted foot on the rail as he hung over the counter. The four gunnies who had come in with him drifted down the bar, in a knot by themselves.

Hatfield sat down at a table in a corner and ordered a beer, when the waiter came up to him. He could see Pallette's face in the mirror, could see the dejected droop of the rancher's body.

"He ain't satisfied with his bargain, I reckon," decided the Ranger. "Vale's got him down."

He wondered if Big Ed, who had so gleefully hired Vale to shove out the Garretts and others, was aware that the great E P would fall into Vale's hands in case Pallette dropped dead by some quirk of Fate—such as a six-gun slug.

Pallette was ossifying himself as rapidly as possible, pouring in the burning red-eye to numb his sensations—or perhaps his conscience. He was obviously sorry for himself.

The four toughs who had come in with the E P owner drank with less abandon. After a while two of them went over to the Annex, picked out girls, and danced with them.

Hatfield hung around on the chance that Vale might show up, but the man did not come in. However, when Pallette had been there about an hour, the batwings slammed in, and Sheriff Al Craig appeared. The Golden Horns was filled with cowmen and their hands, townsmen, and gamblers. Music banged in the Annex across from the barroom. The floor shook as heavy boots pounded away in the dance.

The lean, weathered Craig stopped short as he saw Pallette. Hatfield saw the scowl on the sheriff's face. Craig's stringy, faded mustache bristled, the ends rising. The muscles in his leathery cheeks, one of which was bulged by his tobacco cud, went taut.

"Cuss yuh, Pallette!" sang out Craig. "Are you in on this dispossess of George Tate? A fat tarantula named Sam Ince come along, and he's got iron-clad papers showin' *he* owns Tate's ranch! What in tarnation blazes is goin' on? The whole country's gone loco!"

CRAIG was in a towering rage. He was evidently an honest soul, decided Hatfield, who was being forced to carry out unpleasant edicts of the law. The sheriff was in the position of putting old friends off their lands, driving them from their homes, and it sickened him.

At the sound of Craig's harsh voice, Big Ed Pallette slowly turned. His deep-set eyes were bleary, and he teetered, holding to the bar with one hand.

"Wash—what—huh? Oh, 'lo Al—drink up."

But Craig was too angry to maintain even a pretense of friendliness. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't drink with you, not if I was in the desert and dyin' for a snorter, savvy? For two cents and a rusty collar button I'd run yuh over to the calaboose and toss yuh in for disorderly conduct! Shut up!"

Pallette blinked. He would not rise to any challenge. He was broken. No doubt Big Ed had been largely instrumental in placing Al Craig in office, but an honest man could go just so far.

Craig snorted in disgust, stalked down the bar and slammed a silver dollar on the counter. He had a quick drink by himself, glaring around, but nobody caught his eye or said anything to upset him further.

"So," thought Hatfield, "Vale has Ince actin' as his front to take over George Tate's!"

Mrs. Garrett and Sue had taken refuge at their cousin's place, and now Vale was stealing Tate's ranch and sweeping across the county—and on into Kimble County, where Ince already had seized great stretches of Texas soil.

The quartet of so-called cowboys who had come in with big Ed Pallette carried the unconscious rancher out around midnight, tied him on his mustang, and returned to the E P. Hatfield trailed them out, along the moonlit dirt road from Vanceville to the ranch.

He left Goldy out from the Epe and sneaked in, looking for Barney Vale. But the land shark was not in the main house. The gunnies dumped Big Ed on the couch, blew out the lamp on the table, and went to turn in themselves.

Hatfield silently drew away. He was uneasy, with Barney Vale out of sight. There was no guessing what Vale might be up to next, except that it would be evil. The Ranger was tired after many long hours in the saddle, and he slept in the chaparral, rolled in his blanket. . . .

Next day, from a hilltop, Hatfield watched Sheriff Al Craig as the officer rode alone to George Tate's spread. The Ranger saw the white legal document which Craig handed to George Tate. It was a preliminary notice, no doubt, that Tate must show cause why he was occupying land that did not belong to him. Unless Tate was able to prove his title, later steps would dispossess the rancher.

Tate would certainly have a deed. The deed would have been recorded at a certain time and date in the Austin land records. Yet unless these records upheld the claim, Tate would be in a hopeless position.

"Vale's fixed up Tate's file, like he done the others," concluded the Ranger.

He had spied on Craig only in order to start on Vale's trail. He was behind the sheriff when the lawman started back toward his Vanceville headquarters. Craig was halfway home, when a rider came from a clump of brush near the rough trail, accosting the sheriff. Craig stopped to talk for a moment. Hatfield recognized the man who had ridden up as Sam Ince, Barney Vale's stout aide. Craig spoke with Ince, then shook a fist in the fellow's face, and rode on.

Ince rode southwest. Hatfield dropped Craig, picked up Ince's trail. It led to another small settlement, a sleepy little cowtown called Springdale.

Springdale was not so lively as Vanceville, nor so big. Two main rows of buildings faced each other across a dusty plaza. There were three saloons, one of which took roomers. Ince paused at the bar of one of them, had a couple of drinks and came out. Vale's fat aide rode to a small frame house, its weathered boards lacking paint and black from the sun, where he went inside.

There were three or four armed men outside. Three were sitting on a board bench, and a fourth was leaning with his back to the rear wall. They looked like guards to the Ranger.

HATFIELD kept out of sight, observing the building into which Sam Ince had disappeared. But nothing happened.

He hung around Springdale all afternoon. Siesta time found the settlement practically asleep. It was not until dark fell that Ince and Barney Vale emerged from the small frame house, mounted saddled horses which had been brought up, and rode away, with six gunnies behind them.

The Ranger hesitated. It might be hard to follow them in the night, and he had noted no baggage to indicate that Vale might be leaving his hideout permanently. A small lamp still burned in the little building, and the front door stood ajar.

"I reckon he'll be back, and this is as good a chance as any to look over his stuff," he decided.

He had seen to Goldy earlier, and hidden the sorrel in a stable near at hand. The saloons were open and doing a good business, for the night was warm.

Hatfield went around to the rear of the house from which Vale had emerged. A window was partly open, and he could look into the kitchen, see on through a hall into the front room. One of Vale's killers, sat in a chair by the table, reading a newspaper by the lamplight.

After a while the man yawned, stretched, and dropped the paper. He rose, pacing restlessly back and forth. He went out on the stoop, returned. Music came from the biggest saloon and he looked in that direction. He had been left to watch the hideout, and he was bored. Besides he evidently believed that Vale had little fear of being discovered in Springdale, where he had run after the trouble in Austin.

The Ranger waited. If the guard did

not soon turn in, or go out for a drink, Hatfield meant to strike him down. The man had a flask. He drained it, and closed and bolted the front door. Then he blew out the lamp. Hatfield heard the floor creaking under the guard's weight as Vale's man stretched out on a bunk along the wall.

It was not long until snores told the Ranger that the fellow was asleep. The back door was bolted, but the window was not. Softly he pushed it wide enough, and climbed through, crouching under it for a moment. He had the floor plan fairly well in mind as he kept near the wall, where the boards would not creak so much, and reached the front room.

He was within a few feet of the bunk when the sentry's snoring broke its rhythm. The big Ranger froze where he was, hand poised to whip out his Colt.

"Ugh—ugh! Say, that you, boss? Didn't take yuh long to fix Pallette's clock. What time is it, anyway?"

"Ev'rything's all right, pard," said the Ranger softly.

"What?"

Sleep had dulled the guard's senses. He had started awake, perhaps from the vibration as the big officer crossed the flimsy flooring, and had jumped to the conclusion, as an awakening person often does, that he had been sleeping for a long time.

Hatfield loomed over him. His mind becoming fully alert, the killer muttered a curse and brought his legs around so he could leap from bed. Hatfield could see the man's body silhouetted against the lighted rectangle of the side window. He slashed at the man's head with his heavy Colt barrel, made a full connection on his second try. The killer had tried to reach his pistol in the holster hanging from the end of the bunk, but hadn't made it.

In the dim light, Hatfield checked the limp figure across the bunk. A gag, and bonds made from the blanket, secured the sentry.

The Ranger worked swiftly then. He had comprehended what the gunny had said about Big Ed Pallette. He was convinced that Vale and his gang had ridden to the E P, there to dispose of Pallette, whose usefulness to Vale was no doubt ended.

"I want Pallette," the Ranger thought grimly, but first he would take a few minutes to check up at Vale's hideout

He located a candle stub, lighted it, kept it shaded by his hand. There was a leather bag on a shelf in the kitchen cupboard. It contained papers—the two missing files from the General Land Office at Austin and other interesting documents!

CHAPTER XI

Pallette's Doom

HATFIELD, crouched by the iron cookstove in the corner which hid the candle and gave him some protection in case Vale or some of his men came back, studied the documents he had found.

There were deeds, in Vale's or Ince's names, or showing joint control such as Vale had arranged with Pallette and Larsen of the Triangle 3. The deeds were in perfect order, recorded and stamped.

"I reckon Vale's fixed the files they belong in and put 'em back," thought the Ranger. "Let's see—what's this map?"

It was a map which showed several central Texas counties, a large-scale reproduction of a section of the Lone Star State. A line had been drawn by a pen from Austin westward and bearing thence northwestward, to the city of San Angelo, an important center.

"Passes through E P range, through what was Garrett's, and on Tate's ranch." The ranger nodded. "Then into Kimble—Porter's land and that of others. Why, it's all laid out!"

Barney Vale had control of long stretches of acreage bordering the tenuous line!

There were other papers which Hatfield looked over quickly, for further hints. In the back of his mind, as he studied Vale's secret records, was the urgency that he must somehow save Big Ed Pallette from death. Pallette might prove to be a valuable witness against Vale.

A sheet of notepaper had been crumpled up, then smoothed out, and saved as valuable by Barney Vale. It was a letter to the land shark, a hasty scrawl which read:

> The matter concerning you will be brought up in the Legislature at next session—in about two weeks. Nothing can hold its public announcement off any longer.
>
> Rice

"Rice," muttered the Ranger. "Wonder

if that's the State Senator?"

He recalled having seen Vale receive a letter in the land agent's Austin office. Vale had seemed perturbed, had balled the paper in his hand, then retrieved it. Perhaps it was this warning from a secret connection in high quarters. And such a missive would have blackmail value, if nothing else, to such a dealer as Barney Vale.

"It should tie Vale up plenty if I take these papers," he thought. "Still, he's recorded as owner of a lot of land along that line."

He put the documents back in the brown leather bag and set it by the back window.

The gun guard in the front room was grunting. He was still dazed but coming back to life. Hatfield cut his bonds, removed the gag. Then he quickly left by the rear window, as he had come, carrying the bag with him.

Hurrying up the sidewalk, he paused at the big saloon. At the front of the bar stood a town marshal, surveying the scene. He wore a round badge on his gray shirt.

The tall Ranger stepped in, touched the marshal on the sleeve.

"Texas Ranger," he murmured. "Step outside, will yuh, Marshal?"

The town officer blinked, but obeyed with alacrity. On the stoop, the rays from the lighted windows sheened on the silver star circle, emblem of the mighty Rangers, held in Hatfield's cupped palm.

"Yessuh, Ranger, what can I do for yuh?" asked the marshal.

"I'm in a powerful hurry. Can yuh round up a posse and foller me to the E P Ranch?"

"Do my best, Ranger. It's outside my jurisdiction, though. The county sheriff is Al Craig, at Vanceville."

"I savvy that. But this is a matter of life or death. Get what fighters yuh can and hurry to the E P. I'll go on ahead."

The marshal nodded and hurried back into the saloon, where he could pick out men for the posse. Hatfield went on to the corral next the livery stable where he had left Goldy. A young fellow of about sixteen, the night wrangler, was on duty.

"You look like yuh can ride, son," said the tall Ranger. 'I'll give yuh ten dollars if yu'll saddle yore best runner and make Vanceville tonight."

The lad was willing. He woke a Mexican wrangler who was asleep in another part of the stable. Taking the notes hastily scrawled by Hatfield, and the money, he went to saddle his horse.

The Ranger set out on the golden sorrel, hoping he would be in time to snatch Big Ed Pallette from Vale's deadly grip. . . .

IT WAS an hour past midnight when Hatfield sighted the yellow lamp burning in the Epe ranchhhouse. The bunkhouse and other buildings were dark in the pale moonshine.

His saddlebags, in which he usually carried iron rations, a spare shirt and other necessities during his long excursions in the name of Texas law, bulged with papers. The satchel had proved a bulky nuisance, flapping against Goldy's ribs and annoying the sorrel.

So the Ranger had stuffed the documents into the leather pockets and tossed away Vale's grip, for he needed to make time. From what the sentry at Vale's Springdale hideout had said, Hatfield was convinced the land shark meant to kill Big Ed Pallette.

Vale's game was becoming clearer and clearer, as the sinister land agent clamped his talons on Texas. It was a big game, the stakes running into millions, should Vale win. And only Hatfield could check the man.

Hatfield drew in as close to the ranchhouse as he dared on horseback, and dismounted.

"Wait, Goldy," he whispered, stroking the arched, warm neck of the beautiful sorrel. "I'll call when I need yuh."

He did not need to drop the reins for the sorrel would wait patiently in the vicinity until Hatfield whistled for him. The Ranger had trained the gelding for such a situation.

Hatfield made ready, hanging his heavy spurred boots on the saddle-horn, substituting supple moccasins which he carried for such excursions as that upon which he was embarked tonight. He rubbed dirt on his face and hands to kill the sheen of the skin, left his Stetson, tying his black locks back out of his eyes with his bandanna. He carried his two Colts, and ammunition, in his pockets.

Hatfield flitted toward the house. The spread lay peacefully in the night. It took a little time to creep close, using bits of concealment such as a low bush, a jutting rock, the contours of the uneven, grass-studded yard.

Pressed flat to the warm, sandy dirt, the Ranger could hear the low hum of men's

voices. A cigar end glowed ruby red on the porch, as someone passed through the lighted doorway. On the other side of the house stood a number of saddled mustangs, stamping the ground, whinnying low now and then.

During Hatfield's first investigations, he had learned something of Big Ed Pallette. The rancher was a widower. He had a couple of daughters but they were grown up, married, and lived elsewhere. Save for his hired help, the horse-faced Texan lived alone, alone with the overweening ambition which had forced him to throw in his lot with Barney Vale.

Greedy for more and more land, for power, Pallette had agreed to Vale's schemes, no doubt believing that all he had to do was to pay off Vale when the land shark had disposed of their victims. Unaware of Vale's master plan, or that the E P was but a part of it, Pallette was riding straight toward death. Vale had meant all along to use Pallette and dispose of him finally when the proper time came.

That moment seemed to have arrived, mused Hatfield. The Ranger wasted no sympathy on Pallette, however, for the man had become a willing tool of Vale's. He did desire to keep the E P owner alive. Pallette could ruin Vale in a court of law. Vale was clever, slippery, and strong witnesses would be needed to convict him.

Pallette might already have been killed. There would have been no one to interfere, because decent cowboys, such as Keith Warden, who had ridden for the Epe, had quit in disgust or been discharged at Vale's order. Now hired guns controlled by the land shark had been taken on. They were paid by Pallette, but Vale gave them their orders.

The Ranger started, cocked his ear. Through the night, a singer was approaching the E P, on the road from Vanceville. The men on the porch heard the rider coming, and some of them mounted and rode to meet him.

From the vantage point Hatfield had reached, he sighted Barney Vale, slouched in the open doorway of the house. Then he saw that rider who sang as he rode was Big Ed coming home, after an evening of wassail in town. Three or four of Vale's killers were with him. They never let him out alone, it appeared. Now others joined the procession, grinning at the big rancher's bellowings. The words grew distinguishable as Pallette came up the lane, riding a big white gelding with a gray mane:

Oh, she promised to meet me when the clock struck seventeen,
At the stockyards ten miles out of town.
Where the cows and the heifers and the old fat Texas steers,
Sell for beefsteak at ten counts a pound!
She's my darlin', my daisy, she's humpbacked, she's lazy,
She's cross-eyed, bowlegged and lame,
And they say her teeth are false—

PALLETTE came closer in the circle of light from the door. He slid off his horse, fell to his hands and knees, crawled a few feet toward the steps. A couple of grinning outlaws seized his arms and hoisted him up, supporting him and running him up the stairs, where Barney Vale coldly stared at the lax face.

"You pig, Pallette," said Vale contemptuously. "You drunken fool!"

"Wash wrong, pard? Wash wrong?"

They shoved Pallette through the door and the impetus carried him in. He fell flat on his face on the carpet.

Everybody wanted to see the sport. A drunk was always a source of amusement to such fellows, and Vale's killers bunched in the front of the main room to watch.

"Get up!" ordered Vale.

Hatfield crawled closer, up under one of the open windows halfway down the side of the long wing. He could see the big comfortable living room, with the jutting fireplace built of cemented round stones, to his left. Toward the wall, the fireplace bulge made a small alcove, open only to the room in front.

Amused toughs raised Pallette, who was sodden with drink. He had no doubt been senseless, but the fresh air and the jogging had brought him partially back to consciousness. As the gun guards pushed him into an armchair, the rancher shook his head.

"Give me a drink," he muttered.

At Vale's nod, someone poured one from the flask on the table. In Pallette's condition, it could only help revive him.

Vale folded his arms. His stout form was clad in black pants and a white shirt. His chestnut hair was combed sleek, but could not conceal the bald spot. His fierce violet eyes glinted as he whipped himself into killing rage against his erstwhile accomplice.

"I've stood all I'm going to from you, Pallette!" he snarled. "You've made a jackass out of yourself and I'm through

with you. The boys say you can't hold your liquor. You shoot off your mouth like a kid when you have a few. You've made threats against me. You've talked too much!"

"R-rowr!"

Pallette shook his head, clearing his throat. He hardly heard what was said. He tried to focus his flickering eyes on Vale.

Vale stepped close, slapped him across the mouth. Pallette straightened up, while a hurt expression came over his long face. He put both hands on the chair arms, as though to rise.

"Washa idee? Who hit me?"

A half-circle of sadistic killers crowded between Hatfield and the nauseating scene as Vale and his men made ready to kill Pallette.

There was one lamp on the center table. Pallette was centered in its light, helpless, an easy target.

"You're goin' to get what's coming to you, Pallette," said Vale. "You're going to die!"

CHAPTER XII

The Fight At The E P

SOMEHOW Big Ed comprehended. Perhaps the ominous tone, or the deadly attitude of Vale pierced the liquor fog in his brain. His eyes widened as he realized that death was at hand.

"Vale—don't!" he mumbled.

The shock had somewhat sobered him, but his whole body trembled as though with palsy. His calloused hands gripped at the chair arms. Once again he started up.

"Look out, he's pullin' his gun, boss!" shouted a killer, in mock alarm.

They were at the point of finishing Pallette and Hatfield had to shoot, for Barney Vale had shifted, reaching for a hidden pistol in his pocket. The bullet hastily sent by the Ranger, as he bobbed up at the open window, slashed the arm of a gunman, tore through and struck Vale, who went down among his gang.

The Ranger's second bullet—a flash behind the first, ripped into the bunched killers, while the startling explosions filled the room.

"Watch it!" shrieked a Vale henchman.

The hired killers were scattering, their attention diverted to the window through which the gunfire had come. Guns were flying into outlaw hands. Pallette was on his feet. He staggered off toward the rear of the house where he fell to the mat. Bullets whined over his head.

Hatfield saw Vale's men dashing out of the lighted room, making for the open front door, their bullets, hurriedly shot, singing his way. He had to put out the light. His third slug smashed the lamp chimney, instantly extinguishing the flame.

"Pallette—this way!" he called sharply.

He wanted to get the rancher outside, if possible. A groan answered him. Wounded foes were swearing, begging for help. Hatfield wondered if Vale had been hit, and if so, how badly.

The confusion would not last long. Hatfield ducked down, ran to the next window toward the rear, and dived through it into the room.

Keeping low, as the outlaw bunch blasted at the opening from which he had shot, the Ranger groped with his left hand for Pallette. He heard the rancher grunting, cursing, not far from where the man had fallen.

"I'm a friend, Pallette! Quick! come along!"

"I—I can't use my leg!" gasped the cowamn. "Bullet!" Fear and shock had sobered Pallette.

The Vale men were calling to one another, and some had started around the house. Hatfield had hoped to pick up Pallette and escape by the back way, but Big Ed was down, so that could not be done.

"There they are, over in the corner!" howled somebody, and a Colt flamed, the lead ploughing the floor close to the Ranger and Pallette.

"Roll, cuss it!" snapped Hatfield.

Pallette obeyed. Hatfield seized his shoulder, shoved him into the niche formed by the bulge in the facing of the stone fireplace. With the walls, it gave protection from three sides.

The moments lost by Pallette proved fatal to Hatfield's bold plan, though. He turned, meaning to rush out the rear door, whistle up Goldy, and make his own escape, for Pallette hardly deserved to have anyone sacrifice life for him. But he heard more men coming through the kitchen. They were Vale hirelings who had been asleep in the bunkhouse.

Hatfield kicked over a long, thick-

topped table which had been standing along the wall. With a couple of chairs, it formed a rough barricade toward the open room.

"Draw yore gun, Pallette, and fight for yore life!" he commanded, crouched by the moaning rancher.

Cool in peril, icy nerves of steel enjoying the danger, Ranger Hatfield made his stand.

Pallette pulled himself together. He had a pistol, and he drew it, cocked it.

"Who are you, mister?" he demanded. "Vale—they were goin' to drill me!"

"Name's Hatfield—tell yuh more later. Right now, we got to defend ourselves. Watch yore side, and keep behind the table."

"Vale's got thirty men, anyways," growled Pallette.

"Keep yore dander up. There's help comin'."

Their snarling guns had told Vale's gang they were still fighting. But also, their position was known. There was a lull, as the gunnies took stock. Hatfield crouched at the right side of the barricade, Colt up, hammer spur back under his thumb. He strained his ears, trying to hear what was being said. The Vale men were talking together and he could catch sounds of them from every side.

Every minute was a gain for the Ranger. He had been at the E P for over an hour, and it was now after two o'clock, so the posse from Springdale must be well on the way.

PALLETTE kept grunting. His leg, sliced by a chunk of metal, ached and bled.

Somebody bobbed up at the nearest window, a few feet from the barricade, fired rapidly, the flaming powder seeming to light the whole room. Hatfield sent a slug into the opening. The pistol there suddenly stopped, and there was a dull thud under the window. Other guns, across the way, blasted into the table and wall, ripping splinters from the wood, smashing the adobe to plaster.

There was another lull. Hatfield reloaded the Colt he had been using, placed it on the floor close at hand. He drew his spare, kept it up and ready.

"Pallette! You in there?"

The hail came from the window but nobody was framed in the rectangle lighted by the moonlight. It was Barney Vale's voice The land shark who lay under the window was calling to the rancher.

"Answer him," whispered Hatfield, thinking that Vale couldn't be too badly hit, if he could move around and talk.

"What yuh want, Vale?" growled Pallette.

"Who's that with you?" demanded Vale. "You're actin' like a dumb fool, Ed. We were only fooling. We never meant to kill you."

Pallette's strangled laugh told Vale that he was not that much of a dumb fool, that Vale's argument was absurd.

"You'd better come out," Vale called. "I give you my word you won't be hurt if you surrender. Toss out your guns and walk along with your hands up. We'll let you go."

"Oh, yeah?" said Pallette, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Yuh dirty cuss, Vale, yuh wrecked me! I'd rather die here with a gun in my hand than give up. So'd my pard."

"Who is he? I'm sure he's not Craig."

"Don't yuh wish yuh knowed?" taunted Pallette.

Vale gave up his attempt to parley, to trick the two into coming out. He withdrew. After a time, they caught, with hypersensitive ears, noises on the front porch. Their eyes accustomed to the darkness now, they could make out the lighter windows and the doorway.

To their left, around the heavy stone facing of the hearth, lay two or three of Vale's men from whom occasionally they heard a whisper or the creak of a leather belt. Otherwise, the big room was clear. Vale's paid killers would not venture inside, for Ranger guns had cut them.

A heavy explosion whooshed from the front window directly in line with the niche. A bullet hit the table, split it, moved it with its force.

"Buffalo gun!" gasped Hatfield, stunned by the closeness of it. Two or three more would wreck the barricade!

Flat on his stomach, he edged to the side of the table, thrust his Colt past it. He watched for a faint outline, for the gunner must raise to fire with any aim. In a moment he saw the sheen of moonlight on a long rifle barrel, the head and shoulder of the marksman. He fired twice, and the buffalo gun clattered inside the room.

"What's that?" grunted Pallette, as new sounds reached his ears.

Shouts, the thudding of galloping

horses, came from the west side of the ranch. Guns opened up, and Hatfield felt relief, was sure that the marshal from Springdale had arrived with his posse. Turned from the penned men in the house, the Vale killers were battling against the new threat.

"Look out, feller, them lobos are still lyin' just around the fireplace," warned Pallette, as Hatfield started out.

A slug fired hastily told the Ranger that Pallette was right.

Outside, blasting gun fire and the loud cries of fighting men rang out in the night. For a time it was close in. It began to recede, and died off to scattered shots, then to silence.

Soon they heard galloping horses coming back. There was a pale touch of gray in the eastern sky. In half an hour, the sun of a new day would bathe the world in its beauty.

"Yuh reckon that was the help yuh expected?" said Pallette, with a gulp.

"Reckon so," muttered Hatfield. "That Springdale marshal didn't fetch along enough men."

There was a flareup of noise not far from the house, on the side from which Hatfield had come. He heard men yelling.

"Run him thisaway!" someone howled. "I'll rope him!"

Heavy hoofs beat the earth and a horse screamed.

Hatfield swore. "Sounded like Goldy! They must have sighted him when they chased off that posse!"

A BULLET came within an inch of his face and he drew back. The men were still waiting, just around the bulge of the hearth.

A couple of carbines snapped outside, and then quiet once more reigned.

Hatfield felt the deepest anxiety, over Goldy's fate. The sorrel would not allow others to catch him, but in driving after the posse, they must have flushed Goldy from the bushes. They had tried to rope him, then fired at the magnificent animal.

"Recognized him, I s'pose," he thought, biting his lip hard. He could hardly bear the thought of losing the gelding.

"Dawn's come," announced Big Ed Pallette.

The world had imperceptibly grown visible. Even inside, they could see the shapes of chairs, and the body of a Vale gunslinger near the door. The room was wrecked—chairs and tables overturned, the rug kicked up, fresh bullet scars in walls and floor.

"I smell smoke!" cried Pallette suddenly.

Hatfield had already sniffed the telltale odor of burning wood. The dawn had brought a rising fresh southwest breeze. On the windward side, Vale had ordered a wood fire built and it was eating at the window frame. There was a yellow flare there.

"Kerosene!" said Hatfield. "They just tossed a jug of it into the room!"

The oil carried the flames, which quickly took hold of inflammable materials inside. Acrid smoke caught at nostrils and eyes. The outlaws who had been waiting around the fireplace, had slipped away.

"It won't be long," said Pallette dismally.

He could see his compainon now, the tall man who had saved him. There was awe and fear in Pallette's red-shot eyes. His face was chalky, and his trouser leg a mess of bloody cloth. Even with the dirt staining the Ranger's face, the rancher thought he recognized him.

"Say, ain't you the hombre who rode up and asked me for a job?"

"That's right," the Ranger answered.

"Who are yuh, anyways? All I know is yuh done yore best to save my neck."

"I'll tell yuh when we get to Hades," Hatfield said grimly.

They seemed near that place, with the rising heat and flames, the choking, acrid smoke which made eyes water and made them start coughing.

"They'll shoot us down when we run out," growled Pallette.

"That's their idea," Hatfield said, in a monotone.

The fire had a voice, an increasingly loud roar. But the fireplace stone protected them from it to an extent, and nearby was the open north window. But the fire had a breath which licked at them, reflected from the ceiling and walls. The floor was getting hot.

"We—we got to have air!" gasped Hatfield. "Let's go, Pallette!"

He helped Big Ed crawl to the end of the table.

"Make the winder and fall out and come up shootin'!" ordered the officer. "I'll cover yuh as well as I can."

Pallette pulled himself up, holding with his left hand, weight on his right leg. Hatfield, blinded by smoke, singed by the hot air blowing through the room, staggered

after the rancher, facing death from waiting enemy guns.

CHAPTER XIII

Escape

GRIT, and the instinct which drives man from fire saved the Ranger, for the smoke had nearly overcome him. Pallette lay over the sill, head hanging out. Hatfield somehow shoved him all the way over and, with retching coughs, tumbled from the opening on top of the prostrate rancher.

The draught sucked a thick gray vapor from the burning room. Though the walls were made of adobe brick, there was plenty of tinder-dry trim, and the roof was of wooden shingle slabs. The voice of the fire was terrifying, an increasing roar which aroused the primitive dread of men and animals near it.

Under the whitewashed wall away from the main blaze, Hatfield fought for clarity of mind, for the strength to raise a Colt and make a last fight. The clouds of smoke half-hid the huddled figures of Big Ed and the officer. Close to the ground, protected for the time being from the heat, there was fresh air, wonderful air that the lungs would accept without retching or heaving.

The tall Ranger's ears were roaring, pounding. He was confused, and it was difficult to distinguish whether that noise was in his own tortured brain or some outside source such as the conflagration.

Day had come. It was quite light although the sun had not yet risen. But in the small world occupied then by Hatfield, under the wall, dimness reigned. The few square feet were filled with acrid vapors, and the Ranger's burning eyes watered so he could not see.

Cracklings, a heavy thudding, a new rising note of threat from the fire told that a hole had been burned through the roof, allowing the fire to mushroom into the air. A ruby glow suffused all.

"Come on, Pallette, move!" gasped Hatfield.

The rancher lay crumpled as he had fallen; senseless. Hatfield crawled a foot and, with great effort, dragged Pallette after him. He rested, went on, his progress slow and painful. The breath of the fire seemed to pursue them.

But the air was better, and he was able to see objects. Teeth gritted, Colt in hand, the big officer watched for the enemy, sure they must be waiting for Pallette and himself to stagger from the smoke. He wanted to go down with a gun in his hand, fighting.

He had made fifty or sixty feet away from the burning building, but it was at great cost to his racked frame. He pulled Big Ed Pallette along as he might a limp, dead animal.

In top physical condition, trained to hardships, Hatfield began to gain a hold on himself, as his lungs recovered and his vision cleared. The roaring in his ears diminished. He could hear the voice of the fire behind him, but the confusion was leaving him.

He squatted on his haunches beside Pallette, still gasping. It was astounding that bullets did not tear into them, kill them. Vale had lit the fire to drive them out, but now that they were out, no gunfire came their way.

He began to make out other sounds than the immediate ones which had dominated his tiny orbit.

"Gunshots!" he muttered.

He thought the cracking firearms were to the north, perhaps northwest, of the E P buildings.

Water! It was a frantic thought. His lips and throat were burning dry, he craved it in every pore. Since the first shock had passed, and he was out of immediate danger of death from the fire, he wanted a drink.

He left Pallette lying there and pushed himself up. He could stagger a few steps, and though his head felt light and his legs numb, he held himself up by sheer will. There was a springhouse through which water ran and he made it there. He plunged his face into the cool water, drank, and washed off some of the grime.

There was a tin dipper on a flat stone. He filled it and carried it back to Pallette. He gave the rancher several sips, and dashed the balance into his face. Pallette groaned, twitched.

"Reach, there!"

The command came from behind the Ranger, as he tended Pallette.

Slowly he glanced around. A horseman sat on a black mustang, regarding him, and also staring at him was the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun.

"Sheriff Craig!" cried Hatfield.

"Drop that gun!" said the sheriff sternly.

Hatfield nodded, let go of his Colt. Craig whistled, and a couple of his possemen appeared.

"Check him," snapped Craig.

They came from the rear, felt for hidden weapons. They lifted Hatfield's spare Colt and his knife, then they brought out the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers.

AL CRAIG swore hotly, jumping from his saddle.

"Yuh're Ranger Hatfield, huh? I got yore note the kid fetched from Springdale. Come as fast as we could. And Jake Jervis of the Lazy J told me yuh was all right."

"Yuh're in the nick, Sheriff," croaked Hatfield. "Vale and his bunch set fire to the house to drive us out on their guns."

He realized now what had occurred. The combined might of the two posses, as well as Jervis and his waddies, had forced Barney Vale to flee.

"Give the Ranger back his guns," ordered Craig. "Here's yore star, Hatfield."

The Ranger pinned the silver star on silver circle to his shirt front.

"Jervis and some of the young 'uns are tryin' to catch up with Vale," explained Craig. "But they had scouts out, and Vale had quite a start. A handful drawed us off north, too. I reckon the main party, with Vale, took off another way. There's three dead men lyin' around the ranch."

"It was quite a fight, Sheriff." Hatfield squatted on his hunkers. His tobacco was ruined, and Craig handed him the "makin's." "I just had a plenty of smoke," drawled the Ranger, "but a quirly'll taste mighty fine."

Big Ed Pallette was coming to. Craig was looking over the rancher.

"Say, his leg's cracked, shore enough! Slug must have busted his prop."

When the sheriff fooled with the blood-soaked boot and pants leg, Pallette screamed in agony.

"Tie a rifle to it, get a blanket and make a stretcher," advised the Ranger. "Put him in the bunkhouse. When he can be moved to town, yuh'll hold him in jail, Sheriff. He's been in cahoots with Barney Vale, and he'll make a valuable witness."

"Yuh mean that?" Craig swore in delighted relief. "So yuh're over here after that lobo land shark! It made me sick at my stumimck, the way him and Pallette treated the pore folks they ousted. I had to serve the papers, cuss it!"

"I savvy. Well, Vale's gone too far. The Rangers want him for killin's now."

Hatfield felt much better. He was washed out from what he had undergone but, unlike Pallette, he had no serious wound to cripple him, and his magnificent physical condition quickly asserted itself. He got up, whistled shrilly, to call Goldy, for he was worried over his horse.

The sorrel did not immediately answer, and Hatfield's anxiety grew.

"If Vale and his men shot him," he thought, "I'll take their hides off and hang 'em up to dry!"

But after a time he heard trotting hoofs, and a golden horse shape appeared, coming toward the men. They were still not far from the house, but had moved out of line of the smoke, which was heavy, since the entire center of the house was a mass of flames.

"That yore hoss?" inquired Craig, as he saw the Ranger put an arm over Goldy's withers while the gelding nuzzled him. "Nasty scrape he's got on his ribs."

The saddle, and Hatfield's other equipment—boots, Stetson and cartridge belt, as well as the papers he had taken from Vale's Springdale hideout, were all missing. Along Goldy's left side were abrasions with dirt ground into them. As he felt his horse over, Hatfield found a shallow groove close to Goldy's tail, where blood had oozed and clotted.

He remembered the scream he had heard, while he had been caught in the house by Vale's men. He tried to figure what had occured.

"Wish yuh could tell me, Goldy," he murmured. "Looks like when they couldn't rope yuh, they tried to crease yuh and stun yuh."

"I saw a saddle with busted cinches lyin' about a hundred yards off from the house, Ranger," volunteered a posseman.

"Take me to it," ordered Hatfield.

Craig insisted the Ranger borrow a horse, and he followed Craig's aide to the spot in the drifting smoke where the saddle lay. It was Hatfield's. The cinches had snapped, evidently when the sorrel had fallen from the violent shock of the wound. Boots, hat, and cartridge belt lay near at hand, but the saddle-bags were farther off. It was twenty minutes before he found them, tossed into a bush from which they were hanging.

The documents which Vale prized so highly, and which Hatfield had taken from

the Springdale hideout, were, of course, missing.

The posse made a field headquarters in the E P bunkhouse, upwind from the ruined house. The fire was gutting Pallette's home. Big Ed had been carried to a bunk, and his wound washed and dressed as well as could be done in the emergency.

"Yuh can carry him to Vanceville in a wagon," advised Hatfield. "There's a sawbones there, ain't there?"

"Yep," Craig replied. "I'm mighty glad yuh come, Ranger. I got so's I hated that Vale's insides and I was thinkin' of quittin' this job. What was his game?"

"He's been grabbin' a stretch of land across Texas from Austin to San Angelo, Sheriff. He's an expert on titles and so forth, and he figgered out a scheme he thought was foolproof. Looked all legal-like to him."

"Where yuh s'pose the sidewinder'll head to?"

"I'd have said Springdale, before I found my saddle-bags," replied Hatfield. "But now I believe Vale,'ll run back to Austin. He's got a couple stolen files that need to be returned, in order to clinch his titles."

BARNEY VALE was still dangerous for he had the documents needed to prove his claims to the lands he had pirated. The Ranger, with Pallette's testimony, might be the only way to check the man.

Hatfield led Goldy to the watering trough, cleansed the sorrel's injuries, and turned him into a grassy corral. Then he joined Sheriff Craig who had broken open a padlocked shed to get food. They found a barrel of whisky, too, which they tapped.

After Hatfield had eaten, sleep nearly overcame him. His eyes were swollen, inflamed from smoke and lack of rest.

"I'll have to turn in for a while, Sheriff," he said.

"Go to it."

There were plenty of bunks. It was heavenly to drift off, after the strain of what he had undergone. . . .

The sun was bright and hot, nearly overhead, when Jim Hatfield came awake, refreshed, and hungry again. He got up. Pallette was lying on his bunk. The rancher looked ill. His face was pale and drawn, but his eyes were open, and he was watching the tall officer.

"So yuh're a Ranger!" he said. "I s'pose you're goin' to hold me."

"That's right, Pallette. Yuh shouldn't have played with Barney Vale."

"I'll take my medicine, Ranger. I've been a hog and a fool, but I'll try to make up to them folks."

Pallette was subdued, repentant. His attitude had been completely changed in the crucible of suffering.

A big golden cheese stood on the plank table, with liquor, crackers, and other edibles.

Hatfield carried over a drink and a handful of crackers and cheese to the rancher. The Ranger pulled up a bench,

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and the two men ate together.

"I'm glad yuh've come to yore senses, Pallette," Hatfield said. "Vale's a nasty customer. Yuh savvy he used yuh, to gain what he wanted, then he meant to finish yuh off when he was ready. Yore lands were held by you and him in joint control, so if you died, they went to Vale."

"I see," growled Pallette. "He crossed me, shore enough."

Since Vale had nearly killed him the night before, Pallette was ready to believe whatever evil might be told him of the land shark.

"You ain't the only rancher he tricked into actin' as a catspaw, either," Hatfield went on. "He used a string of big fellers like you to crush the small holders. How much did he charge yuh?"

"Plenty!" howled Pallette. "Hundred a week, just for his services, as he called it. He made me fire my best men and take on a passel of sidewinders and pay 'em! I couldn't get any work outa 'em, and the ranch was goin' to wrack and ruin."

"Yeah," said Hatfield, "you and Larsen and others paid Vale and his killer outlaws, while they planned to gun yuh all out."

Pallette was boiling against Vale.

"I saw Vale kill Lew Garrett, Ranger, and I'll swear to it! I never shot anybody myself, but Vale killed Possum Ransom and Garrett, and I believe he killed others. I'll take whatever's comin' to me, but I hope to live to see Vale stretch rope."

"Yuh will if he don't die of lead pizen first," promised Hatfield. "Yuh'll testify for the law, against Vale, I take it?"

"With pleasure!" cried Pallette.

"I'll do what I can for you, then, Pallette," said Hatfield. "Yuh got a Ranger's word for that."

CHAPTER XIV

An Old Man's Gun

AS HATFIELD and Pallette were finishing their meal, someone looked in through the bunkhouse door. It was Jake Jervis.

"Hatfield!" exclaimed the rancher. "Yuh're awake, huh? Mighty glad to see yuh."

The Pecos rancher came to shake his hand and grin at the big officer.

"I got yore note," Jervis said. "I'd hit Vanceville that evenin' with the boys on the way home. We hustled over with Craig. Just got back from chasin' Vale and his men, but our hosses was done in from the gallop we made out of town, and Vale had too much of a start for us."

"Jim!"

Hatfield turned, to see Keith Warden smiling, hurrying to greet him. Warden's left arm hung stiffly at his side, but he was in good condition save for the flesh wound in his shoulder.

[*Turn page*]

TREACHERY STALK THE TEXAS COAST!

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"I was in Vanceville," he said quickly, "and joined up with Craig and Jervis. I'm shore happy yuh're all right."

They talked over the big fight, and about how Vale had escaped into wild country below the Epe. Many of his followers had gone with him, and Vale had more killers throughout the long stretch of Texas land he had seized.

Hatfield did not wish to ride Goldy until the sorrel had had plenty of time to rest, after his injuries, but went to look after the mount. Jervis went back to help Craig and his possemen who were throwing buckets of water on the hot embers of the house. Pallette's home had been gutted, the adobe walls black, standing stark in the brilliant sunshine.

In the afternoon, a wagon was hitched up to a team and Pallette was carried to it to lie in its bed on folded blankets. Hatfield saddled an E P mustang, and led Goldy on a halter behind him. The fire was out, save for smoking ruins, as they started for Vanceville.

When they arrived in town, Big Ed Pallette was locked in the calaboose, at the southeast corner of the plaza. The town doctor was sent for to set the rancher's broken leg.

The prisoner was under the supervision of Sheriff Al Craig, while Keith Warden and other young men, sworn in as deputies, would help to guard him. Pallette showed no desire to escape, though. He was contrite, desiring only to make amends.

It was warm inside the adobe building, which was a wing of the city hall, and the three cells of the block were separated from Craig's office by a thick iron grille. But the men in the office could hear the physician working over Pallette, and the cowman's grunts of pain.

Hatfield sat on the edge of Craig's flat desk, while the sheriff, Warden and Jake Jervis gathered about him. Other men stood in the shade outside, talking over the fight at the E P, smoking, passing around flasks.

"What yuh reckon'll be Vale's next jump, Ranger?" asked Craig, filling his old briar pipe for a smoke.

"I'm convinced he'll head for Austin and try to return them stolen files to the Land Office," Hatfield said. "He'll have two main ideas—to put the records back so's they'll prove his claim, and to kill anybody who may wreck his game. Such as Pallette."

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff, frowning. "Yuh mean yuh believe Vale might try to grab Pallette out of here?"

"I do. He'd like to be rid of Pallette, and others as well— Keith Warden here, for one. Vale ain't beat yet, by a long shot. Where's the nearest telegraph?"

"There's a wire connection at Frederick," said Craig. "That's a good three hours from here by fast hoss."

'I'd like a trusty man to take a message there for me, and have it telegraphed to Austin headquarters," said the Ranger. "Got a pencil?"

Craig supplied him with writing materials, and Hatfield wrote off his warning to Captain McDowell. It read:

SET SECRET WATCH AT LAND OFFICE. BELIEVE VALE WILL ATTEMPT RETURN OF MISSING FILES. WILL REPORT SOON AS POSSIBLE.

"Yuh're goin' to Austin again, then?" inquired the sheriff.

The Ranger nodded.

"I'm so shore Vale'll want to check up there, that I got to. Meanwhile, you boys stick here and keep close guard. Vale may send a bunch of gunhands to deal with Pallette. Be on the watch, and don't budge unless yuh hear from me otherwise. Savvy? I'll come myself or send a written order."

"I got yore note from Springdale, that the kid fetched, Ranger," Craig said. He felt in a shirt pocket, with surety the paper would be there, then tried others, a mystified look coming over his seamed, honest face. "Thought I had it in my clothes, but mebbe I stuck her in the drawer."

But a search proved that the note was not in the office.

"I could've dropped it, when I hurried out," the lawman said. "I was snoozin' on the couch here when the boy woke me."

'Never mind. I'll have to be movin'... Jervis, yuh can do me a real favor. I don't fancy the gait of that E P mustang I borrered. Can yuh loan me a good mount?"

"Yuh'll take my black, Star," answered Jake Jervis. "He's fast and smart, and a real hoss."

"Thanks, Jake. I want to give my sorrel a chance to let his wounds heal."

THE Lazy J owner's best mount was a long-legged black gelding, with a white star on his forehead. He was met-

tlesome, a dancer. As the Ranger settled in the saddle, Star pranched about, but soon calmed down under the expert's soothing voice and hand.

"He's a honey, Jake," said Hatfield. "I'm obliged. I'll take good care of him. Be in touch soon as I can, gents. Keep a guard on Pallette day and night. I don't doubt Vale has spies here as well as in other places."

Hatfield set out on the run to the capital, where McDowell would soon receive his warning about Barney Vale. It might prove a golden opportunity to trap the land shark, when he sought to replace the stolen land records. And Vale sparked the gigantic conspiracy which the Ranger's keen sleuthing had exposed. . . .

McDowell was waiting for his tall Ranger, when Hatfield rode the beautiful black gelding up to headquarters, dismounted, and started in. Hatfield had timed his entry into the city after dark, for he was aware that Vale might have agents watching Ranger movements. There was a good chance that Vale had discovered or guessed the identity of the tall man on the golden sorrel who had fought him so skillfully.

"Thought yuh'd be in, Jim," said McDowell, slapping Hatfield on the back. "I got dinner settin' for yuh. Knowed you'd be starved."

The old captain led him to the office where he had a snack and a bottle waiting. While Hatfield ate, McDowell gave him the news.

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of Vale. His office has been deserted since the fight at the Land Office that night. I got two trained men hid on the hill, and half a dozen armed recruits in the barracks ready to go into action at an instant's notice."

"I'll sashay over there and keep guard myself later," said Hatfield. "I got a hunch it'll be tonight, Cap'n. Vale wasn't too far ahead of me."

In fact, Vale could have reached town that morning, perhaps, had he come straight to Austin from the E P. But knowing he was wanted, the land agent would hardly show himself on the streets during daylight.

McDowell rose when Hatfield did. The old captain took his gun-belt from the peg on the wall, and buckled it on. He drew his Frontier Model Colt, checked the action, and made certain it was loaded and that the holster was supple and would not catch when the weapon was quickly drawn.

"I'm goin' along," he announced. "It ain't often I get a chance to have a little fun close to home."

Hatfield's gray-green eyes twinkled. He knew how McDowell felt. In his younger days, McDowell had been the best, a fast, hard fighter, as good as any man.

The two rode a roundabout way which brought them near to the General Land Office, looming on its steep hill. They dismounted and, in the shadows, began climbing. They would get in touch with the captain's Ranger agents who were up above.

There was a man at the rear of the building. He challenged in a whisper, and McDowell quickly replied.

"Nothin' yet, suh," reported the sentinel. "When I heard you, thought it might be somethin'."

They made themselves comfortable. Hatfield sat close to a small niche in the stone wall, from which point he could see the little side door which Vale had previously used.

It was a weary wait; hours passed. McDowell stuck with the Ranger, and the two guards were at their posts.

It was after midnight when the sentry who had been watching the rear of the massive building crept up to report.

"Cap'n! Somebody's comin' up the hill."

"All right. Keep it quiet, now. We'll watch till they come closer."

The Rangers strained their ears, peering into the blackness of the shadows. Sounds came, but many were from the city below, and in such dim light, stationary objects such as whitish stone or a clump of hedge, seemed to move.

McDowell touched Hatfield's arm. The old man's eyes were still sharp, and he had seen vague figures, two men, then several more, materialize from the darkness. They were making for the little side door.

A faint, metallic sound reached them, a key in a lock. Hatfield wasn't certain, but he thought that a stout figure, clad in black, was Barney Vale, come to put back the vital files.

ONLY two men went inside. The rest, perhaps four or five, lay down flat on the ground near the side door, to wait and guard.

Everything had been arranged with the proper authorities, by Captain McDowell.

The back door was open, and Hatfield, McDowell, and the sentry went in. They tiptoed through the long corridors toward the file room, guns ready.

A faint light filtered from the high stacks in the file room. Somebody was in there, and they could hear the noises of papers rustling.

The intruder had a bull's-eye lantern. Hatfield, in the lead, crouched low as he went through the open entry from the hall, saw its stab of yellow beam.

"Hightail, boss!"

The shrieked warning came from the left. A man had been standing just inside the door, and Hatfield's ear rang with the shrill cry the man uttered.

Hatfield whirled. A pistol flamed almost in his face as he threw himself around in a desperate attempt to bring his Colt into play.

From behind him came the blasting roar of McDowell's Frontier Model. There was a howl of agony, and the second explosion came from the enemy gun that slanted down.

Hatfield let go a breath later, and hit the wounded killer before the man struck the floor.

The bull's-eye snapped out. Hatfield vaulted the counter separating the public section of the file room from the office where the clerks held sway. McDowell came after him, almost on Hatfield's heels, rolling over the barrier with cursing grunts.

A gun flamed from down the way. Hatfield replied, as McDowell jostled him, trying to beat him to the kill.

The two Rangers rushed their opponent, pistols snarling. The flying lead drove the man around, toward the corner. There were windows here, but they were barred.

"I'll go around the other way, Cap'n!" yelled Hatfield. "Don't let him past on this side!"

McDowell was gasping for wind. The exertion was too much for him. But he was chuckling in delight at being in the fight.

"Trust me, Ranger!" he panted, edging forward.

A slug whirled dangerously close, burying itself in the wooden shelf close to McDowell's head. Hatfield ran swiftly around to the end of the high shelves. His quarry was dodging in and out, seeking to maneuver so he could get out the door, the only way out!

CHAPTER XV

Great Dreams

ONE narrow shaft of moonlight coming in a window touched the Ranger, and bullets burned about him. He shot back at the flashes, and rushed through the aisle, driving his enemy before him with the fury of his Colt.

"Reach, cuss yuh!"

That was McDowell, calling on the cornered rat to surrender. It was a Ranger axiom always to give even the worst outlaw a chance to throw down his gun and surrender. At the same time, this offered the vicious a chance to take a first shot at the officer who showed mercy.

At the turn, Hatfield heard blasting guns, the curses of fighting men. He feared McDowell had been hit, as he heard a shrill Rebel yell pierce above the tumult. Teeth gritted, the tall Ranger swung to the end of the stacks. By the flames of the guns, he could see his captain and the burly, black-clad killer who, head down, was duelling with McDowell.

Hatfield fired, and McDowell jumped forth, his pistol blaring. The man went down, as McDowell landed on him with both feet. The guns ceased their stunning explosions, and then the Ranger had hold of the stout man's arms.

"He's dead, Cap'n!" announced Hatfield.

"*Bueno,*" growled McDowell. "He asked for it."

Shouts and gunshots came from outside. There were fighting men waiting for the file thieves, and so few of Vale's men that they would have their hands full and be unable to come in for an attempt at a rescue.

Hatfield struck a match. The little yellow flame came up. The black-clad figure crumpled on the floor lay on his face, and McDowell, biting his lip, was leaning against the wall, head down, blood streaming from his cheek.

"Cap'n—yuh're hit!" cried Hatfield.

"Ain't—nothin' but—a scratch." McDowell was breathing like a steam engine at work.

"You set down," ordered Hatfield. "Here's a stool. Easy, now."

"That—that was fine!" gasped McDowell.

When Hatfield made him sit down, McDowell closed his eyes, leaning back against the files.

The Ranger bent down. He rolled the dead man over on his back, and lighted another match. McDowell opened his eyes, to look. They stared at the fleshy face, the small eyes glazing in death.

"That ain't Barney Vale!" barked McDowell.

"It's Ince, Sam Ince, one of Vale's chief aides," growled Hatfield.

He felt sold, disappointed. He had expected to take the chief plotter himself that night, but the shrewd Vale had sent his helper, either because he feared there might be a trap waiting there or because he had had other important matters to see to. Ince was no doubt a trained land agent, instructed by Vale. Ince would have known where to replace the files.

"I was shore Vale would have to come hisself," said Hatfield. "I wonder where he is?"

Vale had fooled him, by sending Ince to Austin. Perhaps the land shark had come himself, yet—

He saw that McDowell was not badly injured. A splinter had cut his left cheek and from this the blood was flowing.

"Wait here, Cap'n," he said. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Outside, the recruits and sentries had swept up the handful of gun guards who had come along with Ince. They were plug-uglies, men who worked for Vale in Austin. They would answer no questions. Disarmed, surly, they were led off to the lockup.

There was real alarm in Hatfield's heart. Vale commanded plenty of guns. And somewhere in the vast territory to the west this man rode free, lashing with mad fury as he sought to smash through the meshes of the net the Texas Ranger had cast about him.

KEITH WARDEN sang a gay range tune, something about his girl being a lulu, every inch of her. He puffed on a homemade cigarette as he leaned back in the sheriff's swivel chair, his booted feet up on the desk before him.

He was on guard at the little jail where Big Ed Pallette was dozing in his cell on the hard bunk.

Vanceville was just beginning to stir after the heat of the day—siesta time. The glaring yellow sun which sapped the energy of man when he was exposed to its direct rays, had slanted toward the Pecos and the great mountains in that direction.

Sheriff Al Craig was over at the Golden Horns. Jake Jervis, his Lazy J men, and some friends of theirs were at the saloons or yawning somewhere in the shade.

The world looked bright to Warden. He dreamed of Sue Garrett, of her beauty and sweetness. Soon he hoped to be with her again, when the Ranger had disposed finally of Barney Vale. Keith had a young man's confidence in the future, no doubt of his ultimate success in ranching.

"We'll pioneer," he mused, floating entirely free of his feet as he constructed his castles in the air. "We'll cross the Pecos and set up on a homestead range. I'll buy good breeders and improve the stock. Why, in a few years I'll be known throughout the West for my cows! Warden beef! That'll be me. Thousands of cows, at even just ten dollahs a head—why, it's a fortune.

"I'll even dress Sue in silk dresses and diamond necklaces. I'll wear me a forty-gallon hat, hunderd-dollah boots, whipcord pants and a salmon-colored shirt. Folks'll point out at me and say, 'There he goes! That's Warden, King of the Cattle Empire.' "

In the slowly revolving grayish vapor from his cigarette, the events of his future life could be seen as plainly as though actually happening. A smile touched the cowboy's lips as he gloated over his success.

"When I got things rollin', I'll take Sue and the kids to Paris and London, mebbe even Rome! It'll be a picnic!"

In the excitement of sailing the ocean blue, he jingled the change in his pocket. It amounted to two or three dollars, for he had not been working for wages, and had, in his generous way, bought presents for Sue while in Austin.

"I'll send the kids to college, make 'em famous engineers. Their kids'll be born with golden saddles under their little—"

The bubble of his fancy was rudely pricked as Sheriff Craig came hastily into the office, followed by Jake Jervis and several other men.

The swivel chair hit the floor with a bang, jolting Warden back to reality. He had made the tour of the European capitals in record time.

"I got orders from Ranger Hatfield," puffed Craig, the heat and his haste having shortened his breath. He tossed a letter on the desk where Warden could read:

Sheriff Al Craig, Vanceville.
Come at once with every man you can muster. Vale and his main gang hiding at Shafer's Crossing in the abandoned house there. Will meet you on the road a mile north and lead you in the fight.
J. Hatfield, Lt., Tex. Rangers.

Warden's heart leaped. This was it!

"Let's see her again, Sheriff," requested Jervis. "Yuh positive it's Hatfield's writin'?"

"Looks like the other I got, the one I lost," answered Craig.

"Well, here's the letter the Ranger sent me," said Jervis.

He drew forth a folded sheet, straightened it out, and laid it by the note which had just been brought to Craig by a young lad who said a tall man had stopped him near Shafer's Crossing and told him to deliver the message in Vanceville.

They studied the two messages. Even Jervis was convinced.

"Yeah, it's the same hand." He nodded.

Already possemen were saddling up and checking their guns. Jervis had several Lazy J boys, and they would provide valuable assistance in the coming battle at Shafer's Crossing which was about twenty miles southeast of Vanceville.

"I'll saddle up!" cried Warden, starting out.

"Wait a jiffy," snapped Craig.

Warden turned in the door.

"Every cussed hombre in town can't go along," said Craig. "Pallette's got to be guarded right. We may be out a couple days or even longer, if Vale moves. Hatfield'll be watchin' 'em and can lead us on their trail."

"That's right," said Jake Jervis.

"You stick here and take charge, Warden," ordered Craig.

"Aw, shucks, sheriff, let me go along!" begged Warden.

"No. Yuh got a stiff shoulder and a rough run won't help it any. Jervis, you stay, too, and help the kid. We need an older head here in case anything happens."

JERVIS had been quite willing for Warden to stay but when told to do so himself, he was upset. But he had to accept Craig's dictum. It happened that Jervis, just before the note had arrived, had complained that he felt sick, and Craig had heard him. The sheriff wanted no lame ducks on the hard, fast trip to meet the Ranger and battle against Vale's bunch of outlaws.

Four older townsmen were deputized to assist in guarding the jail.

It did not take long for Craig to mobilize his large force of riders, and it was hardly four o'clock when they rode out of Vanceville.

Women and children were about, but the town seemed lonesome with so many younger fellows gone. Warden and Jervis stared after the risen dust left by the posse under Al Craig.

"That old sidewinder of a sheriff's jealous of me, I reckon," growled Jervis. "Afraid I'd show him up if I was along."

The town was quiet. Six o'clock came, and Jervis waited at the jail while Warden went over to eat at the lunchroom. Then the rancher took his turn. The other detailed jail guards were close at hand, where they could be quickly called. When dark fell, they would sleep at the lockup.

It was still light but the sun was sinking low in the sky. Warden smoked one cigarette after another, rolling them with expert fingers. Jervis was sitting on the sill, his legs sticking from the office door.

"Huh!" grunted the rancher suddenly. "Looks like they're comin' back already, Keith."

"What yuh mean?"

Warden left his chair and went to stand at the door, looking over Jervis.

Dust showed in the south as a large party of riders galloped into Vanceville. Warden waited. He could see only the rising clouds thrown up under beating hoofs, as the buildings cut off his vision.

Suddenly Warden uttered a sharp cry of warning.

"Holy smoke! Come inside, Jervis! It's Vale's bunch!"

The rancher was galvanized to action. Warden was whistling shrilly to call the deputies. Jervis sprang to the door connecting the office with the city hall, and bolted it. He checked the barred windows, and hid the key to the cell-block under the sheriff's desk.

He had his six-shooter, and there was plenty of ammunition. On a rack on the wall were sawed-off shotguns, a rifle, with cartridges and shells in a wooden box. Jervis snatched the carbine, threw in a shell, and stepped to the still open front door.

The four deputies were trotting across the plaza toward the jail, in answer to Warden's whistling.

"I see Barney Vale!" cried Jervis.

Warden recognized others, too, toughs he had encountered in the fight against the land shark.

Vale was back among his outlaws—thirty to forty heavily armed killers, well-mounted!

CHAPTER XVI

Siege

FLAMING guns began blasting. A deputy stumbled, and fell. One of his friends who stopped to help him up was slashed by a dozen slugs which threw him over the first man, dead. The other two made the front door, as Jervis and Warden opened fire on the van of the attackers.

"Lock that door, cuss it!" snapped Jervis, jumping back.

Heavy bullets whipped into the wood, shrieked through the opening to lodge behind them. Warden slammed the heavy oak portal, and threw the inch-wide bar bolt into place.

The windows were barred and narrow, the walls of three-foot thick adobe brick.

"They've come for Pallette!" declared Warden.

"I don't doubt it," Jervis said grimly. "We got to hold 'em. We better each take a wall. If they try to bust through from the city hall, we'll have to barricade and do our best."

Warden peered from the corner of a front window. Rapidly Vale's horsemen had looped out, taking over Vanceville with their guns. They swept past the jail, firing in, whooping it up like Indians.

Jervis swore in quiet satisfaction. He had made a hit. Warden's carbine crackled, and the killers outside, moving fast, checked the fact that the jail was closed up, and armed men were inside.

There was a lull as the building was surrounded. The four inside the office could hear men moving in the city hall annex, and the door was softly tried.

"I'd like to pick off that Vale tarantula," growled Warden.

But Barney Vale kept well back out of danger from chance slugs.

Craig had emptied the settlement of its best fighting men. Vale overawed or outshot what few tried to fight. In the jail, the men there heard a few gunshots from other parts of town, but soon all quieted down.

Dark was at hand. Jervis, crouched by his window, said:

"They're waitin' for night, boys. Then they'll rush us."

The four men trapped in the office waited for the shock of an all-out attack. They had good cover, but heavy posts, used as battering-rams, could breach any wall.

The day ended, plunging Vanceville into darkness. The moon was not yet up.

Listening with straining ears, they again heard noises from behind the door which led into the city hall. Then a cold, harsh voice called:

"You in there! I want to talk with Keith Warden."

"I'm here, Vale," growled Warden.

"I saw you. That's Jake Jervis with you, isn't it? Howdy, Jervis. You did a nice job fooling me, in Austin. I suppose the Ranger made you try it."

"Yuh're a clever cuss, Vale," rumbled Jervis, "but Hatfield'll dehide yuh and sell yore fat for tallow."

"We'll see," said Vale. "As to you boys, I don't care. I want Pallette, though. Turn him over and I'll ride and leave you free. Otherwise we'll have to smash in and take you all."

"Try and do it, Vale!" boasted Warden.

"It won't be too hard," said Vale. "Not with explosives."

A coldness touched Keith Warden's heart. He had not thought of that. If they had blasting powder and caps, or could find such in town it would mean death for them all.

"We'll fight to the end, Vale," declared Jake Jervis.

"You've asked for it and you'll get it," Vale said coldly.

A few minutes later, they heard the heavy thudding against the cell-block outer wall.

"Who's that—what's goin' on?" Pallette sang out to them.

Warden went through with the key, into the block. Pallette, his leg in a splint, was tossing on his cot.

"It's Vale, come after you, Ed," Keith said.

Pallette swore.

"He'll kill me soon as he's through into here! Give me a gun and let me fight it out!"

"That ain't a bad idea," said Warden.

Keith Warden called Jervis, who nodded.

"Let's carry him into the office," suggested the rancher. "He can lie on the floor behind the desk and watch that connectin' door."

They lifted the groaning Pallette and took him into the office, laid him on a blanket, and gave him a six-shooter. Then they locked the cell-block gate again, and Jervis and Warden took stands at either side of it. The wall would protect them, and they could fire around the edge through the heavy bars when the enemy entered the cell-block.

IT WAS black inside. The ominous *thud-thud* of the thick post being used as a battering-ram shook the building, and each time it hit, it startled the men in there anew.

Neither Warden nor Jervis felt like bragging. Though they knew they could kill several of Vale's gunhands before they would be overcome—provided no explosives were used to stun the defenders. They could only hope and pray that Vale had nothing in that line with him, and had not found any in town.

"How yuh reckon Vale savvied to strike, just at this time, Jake?" Warden asked, in a subdued voice.

"Huh?" said Jervis. "Why, I believe that note was a drawoff."

"But the writin'—yuh said yoreself it was Hatfield's!"

"Looked like it." Jervis shook his head. "But yuh savvy Vale is a first-class forger, don't yuh? Such a scalawag could imitate any hand."

"That's right! But where would Vale get a sample of Hatfield's writin'? He'd have to—" Warden broke off with a curse. "The note the sheriff lost! Vale had spies here in town. They picked up the Ranger's message where Craig dropped it!"

"Yuh got it," agreed Jake Jervis. "Shore."

Warden sought for crumbs of comfort in the situation. He knew that Vale would kill him, and kill Jervis and Pallette. Of course, Hatfield would still be on the land shark's trail—unless Vale managed to dry-gulch the Ranger.

"If he catches Hatfield, and mebbe Craig, there won't be anybody able to fight the lobo," the young waddy thought. "Then he kin deal with Tate, and the Garretts, and anybody he wants to, any way he wants to."

"Heaven help Texas, if that sidewinder Vale wins out!" said Jervis suddenly.

The rancher had expressed Warden's sentiments exactly. He wanted to live, to be with Sue. Life which had looked sweet, looked even sweeter as the chance of survival dimmed in the cowboy's heart.

"They're through the wall," said Jervis after a while, his jaw tight and hard.

Falling stone, the lighter noises made as splintered bricks were easily knocked aside, came to them. They saw the widening breach, the faint outline of the hole.

"I'm goin' to sting 'em!" whispered Jervis.

He raised his shotgun and sent two blasts of buck from his shotgun at the opening. Men screamed. The flying shot had slashed as it spread, driving them from the hole.

Then came the reply—six-gun bullets, and answering buck which spattered all about the grille. The two men who guarded it had to keep back, for the air was full of death zipping through the bars or spattering as it struck the metal.

Under this fire, bolder gunslingers entered the cell-block. Quickly they discovered that the prisoner was gone.

There was a parley, then the heavy *thud-thud* of the battering-ram began at the connecting door into the office. The desk was shoved against the portal, but soon the wood began to splinter.

Warden and Jervis, the two deputies, and the crippled Big Ed Pallette gripped their guns, waiting to take as many along as possible when they died in the death rush. . . .

On Jake Jervis's splendid black gelding, Star, the Texas Ranger made good time in his return to Vanceville, as he frantically sought for some sign as to Barney Vale's movements.

Hatfield had been unable to get even a hint of where Vale had run to, or what his next plans might be, from the handful of sulky toughs he and McDowell had captured at the General Land Office in Austin. Either the outlaws did not know—as they kept repeating—or they were unwilling to jeopardize their chief's chances of eluding the law. For with Vale loose, there was always a hope they might be rescued one way or another.

Only by figuring out what his enemy would be likely to do, had Hatfield made his decision to run for Vanceville and the heart of the district in which Vale had been operating his evil scheme.

There was that second idea he had had

—that Vale would seek to dispose of Big Ed Pallette. The rancher was the most dangerous witness against Vale, with the exception of the Ranger. Either of them could convict the land agent.

Star was not so well-trained to Hatfield's hand and mind as was Goldy. He could not be. Star was a clever horse, however, a fine runner with plenty of stamina. He had stood the trip well.

SEVERAL miles back, Hatfield had taken the southeast turn off the east-west trail. A sign there said: "Vanceville—15 miles." The road was poor, full of holes and protruding rocks. There were few good highways in the central and western section of the state.

"We shore need some better roads," thought the Ranger, as Star nearly went down in the dark shadows covering a deep ditch across the way.

He had an uneasy feeling that Vale was ready to strike, that danger loomed. It urged him on, to more and more speed.

The moon was up, but this accentuated the black spots. He slowed a bit, straining ears and eyes ahead. Goldy always gave him warning when the sorrel scented trouble, strangers near, but Star had not been trained for that however.

Star seemed eager, he kept pulling at the bit.

Hatfield reared the black as a man jumped out on the road, and the moonlight glinted on a rifle barrel.

"Halt!"

Hatfield jerked on the left rein, as the challenger let go with a hasty shot which missed entirely.

"Hey, Sheriff—Lazy J—thisaway!" shouted the fellow in the road.

"Hold it!" called Hatfield hastily. "Is that Craig and his party?"

"Yeah, yeah! Who are you? Why didn't yuh halt if yuh're a friend?"

"I ain't in the mood to give in easy," drawled the Ranger. "Send Craig out. I'll talk to him."

Soon Craig's voice, thick with sleep, hailed him.

"It's the Ranger, Craig," Hatfield replied. "What yuh doin' out here this time of night?"

"What are we doin'!" Craig was amazed. "Why, we run to Shafer's Crossin' at yore command!"

Hatfield pushed back on the road. In the faint light he stared down at the thin face of the old sheriff.

"My command?" he repeated. "I just come from Austin. I sent yuh no orders."

Members of Craig's posse, camped in the bush, were coming out now, collecting around the Ranger.

"We waited around Shafer's for hours," insisted Craig. "We scouted and found the house at the Crossin' was empty, no signs of anybody havin' been there. I left two men hid nearby with a message for you, and we started home. When dark fell we was tired, and our hosses wore out, so we figgered we'd camp the rest of the night and go back in the mornin'—if you didn't show up."

It all came out. Hatfield heard the whole story. And learned that Warden and Jervis had been left in Vanceville!

Hatfield's anxiety mounted with each word.

"That note was a drawoff, Craig!" he said abruptly. "Vale may be in Vanceville right now! Rout out yore boys and foller me!"

"But the handwritin'!" wailed Craig.

[*Turn page*]

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
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"Vale's a clever forger. That's his business. Hustle! I'll go on ahead."

Hatfield spurted past the deputies, along the pitted, rocky trail, flogging for Vanceville.

Star, the black gelding, had made a fast race from Austin. He had strength, but not Goldy's staying powers. By the time Hatfield sighted the lights of Vanceville, foam stood out on the usually sleek flanks, and Star's breathing came hard. Still he drove on, loyal to his blood, his training. He had a brave heart.

On Hatfield's breast glinted the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Rangers. His carbine and six-shooters were loaded and ready as he flashed straight into Vanceville.

The wind of speed whipped at his Stetson brim, and the hat tugged at the chinstrap under his rugged jaw. His gray-green eyes had the cold quality of the icy depths of an Arctic sea. Sitting easy in the saddle, he stared ahead, and he could hear the gunfire.

It came from the jail!

There were dismounted men about the city hall and calaboose. As he approached, spurting along the main highway, he was fired upon from the sidewalk, but he was moving fast and the bullets only sang near him.

He veered, turning Star onto the plaza, and bore down on the lockup.

In the rear, where the cell-block was, he saw the gaping, black hole that had been smashed in the wall.

"Wonder if they got Pallette!" he thought anxiously, sizing up the situation as he moved.

Figures in Stetsons and sombreros, leather clothing and spurred boots turned to fire on the Ranger as the shrill alarm went up.

Alone, Hatfield charged straight at the enemy.

"Barney! Barney! It's the Texas Ranger!"

A stentorian-voiced lieutenant howled the warning, above the noise of the rising guns.

There was not the slightest doubt it was Vale and his gang. As Hatfield had surmised, they had drawn off Craig and the possemen, then attacked. A gun spurted flame from a barred window. Hatfield knew that spot was the sheriff's office.

"Some of 'em are still alive and kickin'!" he thought, hope rising. "Now we'll see!"

CHAPTER XVII

Encounter

DARING outlaws held Vanceville. The citizens were in their homes, not daring to take a step outside for fear of a death bullet.

Several patrolling killers, who had been riding up and down the streets, converged toward the plaza at sound of the new alarm. There were hired guns behind every spot of cover surrounding the jail, and evidently more inside the city hall. Lanterns moved in the windows, but somebody in there let go with a blasting shotgun or barking Colt.

Guns were swinging on the Ranger. He heard lead in the air, and his Colts blazed back. The dismounted sentries around the building, while they had protection from the fire of the men inside, were exposed to Hatfield and he stung them hard. Some jumped up and ran away, toward the oak clump nearby.

In a window, as Hatfield tore past at the black's top speed, he thought he glimpsed Barney Vale's stout figure, as the boss was framed by the lanternlight. Vale, at the insistent alarm, had run to the opening, close to the wall between the lockup office and the city hall.

Hatfield tried for Vale. Vale ducked back, out of sight. The mounted patrols were coming at the officer then, and their guns snarled.

The Ranger could only hope to delay them long enough for Craig to bring his large force into action. He could not hope to overcome so large a force of killers single-handed. He rode on across the plaza, swerved as he saw two horsemen coming his way. He knocked one man from his saddle, and the other slowed, to swing away.

Star slid in the dusty street as he made a pivot, obedient to Hatfield's tug at the reins. The Ranger cut out to the plaza, along the other side, with the front of the calaboose and city hall to his left.

Curses and gunshots hailed his reappearance. To his right, he saw the big collection of saddled mustangs, which must have brought Vale's bunch to the settlement for the night attack. The horses were being held by dismounted outlaws. There were thirty to forty horses

and without hesitation he charged. Like a mad centaur he tore at the mounts, whispering as he came. His Colts blared, and a stinging slug sent a man holding a bunch of mustangs staggering and screaming.

The mustangs were already excited by the din, and now the shrill Rebel yell of the Ranger, his deliberately created hubbub, started them snorting, dancing. A couple of men with the animals dropped bunches of reins, to whip up their guns and try for the shadowy rider. Then the mustangs broke, running every which way in a blind stampede.

Barney Vale ran out the open double doors of the city hall, shouting orders to his men. It was a calamity to such fellows to see those horses, on whom they depended to make their escape, disappear. Yelling, outlaws ran for the mustangs, trying to snatch at the flying reins of the running animals.

Mounted patrols from the town were coming at Hatfield over the plaza now, and they pressed him away from the adobe walls. He saw a gun flash from a barred window in the front of Craig's office.

The sweated black gelding heaved under him, casting lather specks from his wet flanks. The Ranger slowed, moving around a line of buildings along the street south of the plaza, to give Star a breathing spell. Three mounted killers who had been keeping the citizens under their guns tore around the corner after the tall officer, and there was a brief exchange of shots as they drove him onto Main Street.

Perhaps Vale thought by now that the Ranger must have help close behind him to make him so daring. At any rate, as Hatfield cleared the other end of the houses, he glimpsed Barney Vale running full-tilt across the wide, dusty road. Vale ducked under the continuous hitchrail, fully aware of the bullets kicking up the dirt, flicking the wooden posts, as Hatfield took long distance cracks at him.

Then Vale rushed into the Golden Horns, out of sight of the Ranger, who was pushed away from the plaza by patrols who were converging on him. Vale had had about a dozen of his men riding the streets to keep down any organized resistance. Those patrols had made it plain that any man who stuck his head out was liable to have it shot off.

A shrill cowboy whoop trilled on the warm night air. It came from northeast of Vanceville, from the rough dirt trail over which Hatfield had arrived in town.

His heart leaped. That yell heralded the approach of Sheriff Craig and the fighting men under him, the young fellows of the town and the Lazy J outfit. Cutting off, to elude the patrols, Hatfield had a vista up the street. Riders were charging toward the city hall and calaboose, and the Ranger knew they were Craig's men.

PANIC seized the gun-fighting outlaws. They ran from the city hall, deserting their posts around the building. Firing opened up the moment Craig's boys sighted the enemy. Groups of dismounted killers were swiftly run down, and either surrendered or ate lead. The sheriff, panting from the exertion, galloped up, roaring orders, his floppy mustache bristling, his Colt barking.

The patrols who had been after Hatfield quickly saw what was occurring. They quit the chase, and cut away southward, attempting to escape while there was time.

Intent on catching Barney Vale, Hatfield spurted toward the Golden Horns, straight along Main Street. He ran inside, leaving Star with reins dropped at the hitchrail. A pale-faced bartender peeked gingerly over the top of his counter, recognized the Ranger and the star.

"Outlaws, bandits—they're holdin' the town, Ranger!" he gasped.

"They're cooked now!" Hatfield yelled back at him. "Pronto—did yuh see Barney Vale—the stout hombre who just come in here?"

The barkeeper pointed to the rear.

"He run on through, Ranger. I believe he headed for the stable."

Hatfield barged out through the swing-doors at the front, mounted Star, and cut through the side way to the back street. Not far off was the corral belonging to the livery stable where he had boarded Goldy in order to allow the sorrel's wounds to heal.

Somebody was yelling down there.

"Hey, that ain't yore hoss! Come back!"

Hatfield swung Star that way. A wrangler was dancing up and down, shaking his fist after the disappearing figure of a rider, rushing south out of Vanceville.

"Was that Barney Vale?" demanded the Ranger.

The wrangler stared at the tall man on

the lathered black.

"Mebbe. He stole the best hoss we got here, a golden sorrel! Say, you're the Ranger! Stout feller I've seen around town snatched yore sorrel. There he goes!"

Hatfield was already moving on Vale's trail. He made the corner, glimpsed the man ahead, spurring and flogging Goldy with a vicious quirt. The mettlesome sorrel was fighting the bit. He did not like strangers to ride him, but Vale was beating him into line unmercifully.

Fury clutched at Hatfield's pulsing heart. The black was almost done. His head dragged, his gait was slow. Star was trembling with exhaustion beneath the mighty Ranger. He could not even hope to hold his own with Goldy, even though the sorrel must be stiffened from injuries.

The Ranger rose in his stirrups. He dared not fire at Barney Vale, who hugged low over the gelding. Slugs sent in the dim light, at such jolting speed, might well kill Goldy instead of the thief.

Hatfield whistled, shrill blasts which reached Goldy's keen ears. The sorrel slowed. Vale beat him with the quirt and dug in the cruel rowels, but the gelding twisted in the air, reared back, fighting with all his fury. Vale had to use all his knee strength, and clutch at his saddle-horn to keep his seat. The next instant Goldy went down, rolling, seeking to pin the killer under his weight.

Somehow, Barney Vale got clear. He was up, limping, for his leg had been half-crushed as the heavy sorrel had pressed and twisted it.

A gun flamed, and Star faltered, turning from it as Hatfield left the leather and hit the ground running.

He could see Vale with hypersensitive clarity in the moonlight, the gleam of the clenched teeth, and the fire of the hard eyes. The stout figure crouched, Colt drawn, shooting it out with the advancing Ranger.

"Throw down, Vale!" shouted Hatfield. "You're under arrest!"

For forgery, perjury, for worse crimes against the people of Texas. Vale had killed, taken what he wanted.

"Ranger!"

It was a single word, but its screaming, high-pitched tone expressed Vale's burning hate for the man who had smashed his plans of empire, run him to this.

Vale fired again at the charging officer who had offered him a chance to surrender. The Ranger's heavy Colt blasted. Vale turned, writhing with the shock of the lead in a vital spot. He still gripped his gun, and it went off, but the flare was downward and the bullet entered the sandy earth.

Vale collapsed. Goldy had got up, shaken himself. The golden sorrel uttered a screech of rage, charged his enemy, drove his hoofs again and again into Vale's body.

"Enough, Goldy!" growled the Ranger. "The cuss is dead!"

Barney Vale was finished, done in, a heap of flesh and clothes on the plain. . . .

BACK at the city hall, Hatfield found the men who had fought with him in full control. Prisoners, toughs who had ridden for Barney Vale, had been herded into the cells, and guards had been placed on them.

A light shone in Craig's office. Hatfield entered. Craig hailed him, and there was Keith Warden, shaken, stained with blood running from many cuts, and yet not much hurt. Jake Jervis held his right arm limp, for it had been injured by a flying chunk of buck which had sliced it. A deputy lay on his back, his eyes closed. He had been badly hit.

The office was a shambles. Pallette was there on a blanket. He was grinning, however, and still living.

"It was some battle, Ranger!" exclaimed the rancher.

The door of the sheriff's office had been smashed in, as well as the door between the city hall and the office. But the defenders had made a barricade of the furniture. Bullet-holes decorated the walls and windows.

"Yuh come in the nick, Jim!" cried the excited Keith Warden.

* * * * *

Reporting to Captain Bill McDowell at Ranger Headquarters in Austin, Jim Hatfield took a chair by the old officer's desk. McDowell was still feeling the effects of the scrap at the General Land Office. His system did not rebound as it had of yore.

"Yuh settled Vale's hash for him," growled McDowell.

"Yes, suh." Hatfield nodded. "Pallette'll get a jail term, Cap'n. He give me a hand and was willin' to help convict Vale. That stampeded that Vale sidewinder, and the judge should take it into consideration when he sentences Pallette. Big Ed is

mighty sorry for what he done. He's asked Keith Warden to be his ranch manager while he's in the jug. Warden'll marry Sue Garrett, whose dad was killed by Barney Vale."

"Yuh savvy what Vale was after, don't yuh?" asked McDowell.

"Yes, suh. They're goin' to pass legislation runnin' a first-class highway from Austin to San Angelo, where there's nothin' but a bunch of dog trails now. It'll open up the whole country, and the lands touchin' the road'll jump way up in value. Vale wanted 'em. He thought he had a fool-proof scheme to get 'em, too, with the law on his side.

"He was familiar with the workin's of the Land Office and all, and snatched his big chance. He begun changin' the records and savvied just what to do. All he had to do was borrer a file, alter what he wished, and put her back. He did steal a key to a side door, but at first he didn't even need to sneak in nights, for they've been mighty careless up there, Cap'n. The system ought to be changed so's anybody who wants to can't stroll in and take out a file without close supervision."

"I'll speak to the governor at once." McDowell nodded.

"Wait a day or so," drawled the Ranger. "Vale done a lot of damage, and lawsuits and so on cost money. I got a list of pore folks whose places were took by Vale and his bunch. And before the system's changed, and those people have to go to law to prove their claims, I want to put things to rights, far as I'm able."

"I'll leave it to you," said the Ranger Captain.

"The Garretts'll get their home back. Frank can run the spread. Porter'll have his ranch, too, and so will others. I threw a real jolt into Larsen, who acted as Vale's dupe in Kimble County. That's why it took me a while to get back. I've been attendin' to all the messes left by Vale on the line from here to San Angelo."

When Hatfield had finished repairing the damage done at the General Land Office, he again rode the golden sorrel on a warming morning toward McDowell's quarters. A newspaper on a stand caught his eyes with its black headlines.

He dismounted, bought a copy and stood scanning the story below the headlines which read:

STATE LEGISLATURE PASSES AUSTIN-SAN ANGELO HIGHWAY BILL!

"Well," he mused, "them folks who were put upon by Vale'll find theirselves mighty well off."

McDowell was waiting for him, restlessly pacing up and down the office. There was a dark look on the old Captain's face.

"Glad yuh're here, Hatfield!" he greeted abruptly. "Trouble—trouble! Always yuh shove one sidewinder out of the way, and there's another bobs up! Look at this!"

McDowell had reports from the southwest, across the Pecos.

"I'm ready, Cap'n," Hatfield said quietly.

He was glad to shake off the smells and dust of the city, mount the golden sorrel and head for the mighty wilderness, carrying the Law to Texas.

Follow the Further Exciting Exploits of Jim Hatfield

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GULF GUNS

NEXT ISSUE'S SMASH-PACKED COMPLETE RANGER ACTION NOVEL!

Near Zeke, the old burro, Sheriff Star Redman was propped against the rock wall, his head slumped forward on his chest

JACKSON OF HORNTOWN

By JIM MAYO

Matt Ben was the last of a notorious clan but his only pard was an old pack burro when he had to make his most serious decision!

HORNTOWN belonged to the desert. A double row of false-fronted buildings faced a dusty street into which the bunch grass and mesquite of the desert had crept at last. It was a byway for nothing more than an occasional rabbit, the rattlers that lived in the foundation of the Waterhole, a saloon in which water had never been served, and the solitary burro who wandered like a gray ghost among the weatherbeaten boards of the old buildings.

To the east and west, craggy ridges of red and ugly rock mountains exposed their jagged summits to the sky. To the north, the narrow valley tapered away to a mere gully down which a dim trail had once led the unwary to the sink of desolation that was Horntown. To the south, the valley widened into the Black Rock Desert. There were few trees and less water.

Yet had there been a watcher in the ghastly emptiness of the lifeless ridges he might have seen a single horseman riding up the trail from the desert. He rode a long-legged buckskin which shambled wearily through the dusty mesquite. The

rider rode with eyes glazed from sun and dust, and even the sight of the ghost town brought no expression to his hard, brown face.

That watcher, however, could have determined from the way the man rode that he was going to a destination. All the way across the waterless waste to the Black Rock, he had ridden as to a goal. And that, in itself, meant something.

For Horntown was a forgotten town. It had lived wildly, desperately, and had died hard in a red-laced fury of gunshots and powdersmoke, and the bodies of the men who died had laid where they had fallen.

Yet the lean, sun-browned man with the bloody bandage on his head rode straight, even if with many twists and turnings through this broken country, to Horntown.

The red-rimmed, gray eyes that stared back over the trail carried no hint of mercy or kindness in their depths. They were the eyes of a man who had looked at many men across a gun barrel. A man, too, who had lived the hard, lawless way, and would die as he had lived.

It was fitting that he rode to Horntown, for Horntown had bred many such men, and the town itself had died many deaths. It was begun over a hundred years earlier by a westward bound gold-seeker who decided he had gone far enough. It died its first death two years later because its founder owned a horse —and a passing stranger needed a horse.

JACK HORN had died with his gun in his hand. Seven months later, a Mexican named Montez opened the town again, and opened the bar. He combined tending bar with robbing casual travelers until he picked the wrong man and died on his own doorstep. It was after that the first Jackson came.

Enoch Jackson was from Tennessee and he was a feuder. Tall, leather-hard, and rawboned, he stopped in Horntown with his six tall sons, and the heyday of the town came into being.

It is a curious thing that no matter how sparse the vegetation, how remote the place, how difficult the problem of materials, a man who wants a drink will make one. So the Jacksons opened a saloon. No one ever guessed of what the liquor was made, but it fed fire into the veins of a hardy brood who turned the country to the south into a whirlwind of evil with their gun fighting, rustling, and holdups.

For fifty years the inferno that was Horntown was ruled by the stern weatherbeaten Enoch and his powerful son, Matt Ben Jackson. A roving gunman killed Enoch, then died with Matt Ben's bullet in his middle just two hours later. He died where the valley of Horntown opened into the Black Rock Desert, and he died hard.

After that, Matt Ben took his half brother, Firehat Jackson, to side him in leading the Horntown bunch.

Two months later Sheriff Star Redman rode down to Horntown with a posse of thirty men. They never reached the town, and when they returned to their homes, there were nine empty saddles and eleven of the remaining twenty-one men were wounded. Twice more Redman stabbed viciously at Horntown, and finally, on the fourth attempt, the final bloody battle was fought.

Star Redman swore he'd end Horntown or never return. He ended it, but of the twenty-six men in that last posse—and picked men all of them—only seven, including Redman, rode away.

Behind them one man remained alive. Matt Ben himself. Forty, tough, and wounded wickedly, he watched the last of the attackers ride away. Then like a cornered rattler, he crawled back into the Waterhole and poured himself a drink.

A month later, a wandering prospector found him dead on the floor, his gun in his hand. It was late fall, and the body hadn't changed much in the chill, dry weather. Matt Ben had amputated his own wounded foot and had shot himself when apparently dying of blood poison.

Searching the town, the prospector, who knew Horntown well, found all of the Horntown bunch but one. That one was Firehat. Or rather, all but two, for with Firehat vanished Matt Ben the younger.

"He'll come back," Sheriff Star Redman said bitterly. "He's a Jackson, an' he'll come back. What I can't understand is him ever runnin' away in the first place."

"Them Jacksons is feuders, Star," the prospector answered as he grinned. "When Firehat left, he took young Matt Ben with him. Young Matt Ben was only six, and too young to fight—then."

"Mebbe so," Redman nodded. "Could be."

Firehat Jackson died alone, ten years later, in Sonora. The word drifted back

to Webb City, sixty miles south of Horntown. Star Redman took the news with a strange light in his eye.

"Sonora, hey? How'd he die?"

"Rurales surrounded him," said his informant. "He took eight of them along."

Redman spat.

"I knowed it! Them Horntowners never die by theirselves! If'n one of 'em's got him a gun, he'll take somebody with him!"

"Well," someone said, "that ends the Horntown bunch. Now we can rest easy."

"I ain't so certain," Redman said quietly. "Matt Ben the younger's no doubt still around."

"But he wasn't one of the old bunch, Sheriff. He was too young t' have it matter. He won't even remember Horntown."

Star Redman straightened, and shifted his chew in his jaws.

"He was a Horntown Jackson!" he said caustically, and walked off toward his office.

THE lone horseman on the yellow horse rode up the trail at a shambling trot. When he sighted the buildings of Horntown he slowed to a walk and slid his rifle from his scabbard. Riding with it across the saddle, he came up into the street of Horntown.

There were no more than twenty buildings standing. The nearest one was a gray, battered house, beyond which lay several shacks and corrals. And then there was the rambling structure still graced with a faded sign indicating it for the old and ill-famed Waterhole.

The rider of the yellow horse rode up the silent street, his eyes searching for some sight of light. There was none. The street showed no signs of travel, and one side of it had been worn into a gravel marked gully a couple of feet deep where water had run down hill from a corner of the Waterhole roof.

A spot of white at the corner of a building startled the buckskin, and the man glanced down. It was a human skull, white and bleached. Grimly, he looked at it.

"Well," he said dryly, "that's likely an uncle of mine!"

He swung down in front of the Waterhole and stepped to the boardwalk. It echoed hollowly the sound of his boots. The door was closed. He opened it and walked in.

Dust and cobwebs hung over everything. The chairs and tables remained as they must have been when the fight ended, long ago. A few chips were scattered about, and a few bottles, empty. Propped against the bar was a skeleton, rifle beside it, gun belt still about the lank, white hips of bone.

Slowly, the man uncovered his head.

"Well, Dad," he said softly, "yuh died hard, but game."

He turned and walked outside. A few minutes' search and he found the spring that had caused old Jack Horn to stop in the first place. Crystal clear water still ran from the rocks and trickled into a pool in a rock basin, and then trickled off into a little brook that lost itself down among the rocks.

He filled his canteen, then drank, and afterward washed himself. Removing the bloody bandage, he bathed his head, then washed his hair thoroughly. Yet through all these operations he kept his eyes moving, shifting, watching.

When he had finished washing, he went back up the little rise to the saloon, and entering, found the fireplace and prepared a meal.

He was digging a grave for his father's bones when he heard a sound. He straightened, then slid a gun into his hand, and waited. Listening, he heard the sound of feet, shambling, hesitant, and then a long gray head with forward thrust ears appeared around the corner.

Young Matt Ben Jackson holstered his gun. Then he got out of the grave and stood looking at the burro. "Hi, Zeke," he said. "Come here!"

At the once familiar name, the burro lifted its nose, and the voice and scent of this man plainly struck a responsive chord, but he hesitated. Matt Ben called again and again. Then slowly, with hesitant steps, the aged burro came out from behind the building and walked toward him.

"It's all right, Zeke." Matt Ben said quietly. "It's a Jackson come home."

ALMOST three days later, Pierce Bowman walked into the sheriff's office in Webb City.

"Wire for yuh, Star." He handed the hard-visaged sheriff the message. "Looks like you was right. Matt Ben's on his way home!"

"He's already here," Star said dryly. "Out to Horntown. Tim Beagin rode by

there day before yesterday and saw smoke risin' from the Waterhole.

"Didn't aim to bother him none," the old sheriff went on. "Seems sort of natural, havin' a Jackson out there, but this here wire changes matters. I got to get him."

"Yuh takin' a posse?" Bowman queried.

"Nope. Just me. I reckon if he's a Jackson we'd never get nigh him. Them Jacksons could always smell a posse ten mile off."

"What they wantin' him for, Sheriff?" Bowman asked.

"Sheriff down to Carson tried to take him," Star replied. "He wouldn't go. The Carson sheriff made him a mistake then. He reached, and young Matt Ben drilled him. Plumb center!"

"Them Jacksons always could shoot," Bowman agreed. "How you figger to take him, Star?"

"Darned if I know! Them Jacksons was always powerful good men with the gun or on the trail. Takin' him'll be bad all right."

Sheriff Star Redman took the Horntown trail with no pleasant thoughts. He had no desire, at his age, to shoot it out with a Horntown Jackson. When he was younger it had been different. Now he was more temperate. Now he realized that the Jacksons had been a product of their times as he was, and not really bad men. They had never killed unless firing at an equal and in open combat. They had never murdered, and their crimes had been against the wealthy.

There was a certain amount of excuse for them, even though Redman knew he had no right to think of that. This young Matt Ben might be different, he thought. And then again he mightn't. The Jackson blood was strong.

Star Redman knew the hills. He believed he knew them better than young Matt Ben. And in this knowledge he saw his big chance—to get close without arousing suspicion. He glanced skyward, sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Smells like snow," he muttered. "Time for it, too."

Young Matt Ben was thinking the same thing. Carefully, he began gathering wood and scrap lumber to pile against the Waterhole. Also, he began repairing a few holes in the one room of the building he intended to use. It was time for snow, and if he was to winter in Horntown, he would have to be ready.

He liked working with his hands. He repaired the door, making it fit tight. He removed a broken board from the side of the building and fitted in another. He stacked fallen timbers and broken boards against the side of the house within easy reach of the door. He carefully avoided the thought of food. That was another problem. He had enough to last three days, with care. After that—well, it would be time to worry then.

Old Zeke hung around, watching him. Despite his efforts, he couldn't lay a hand on the old gray burro. Flop-eared, it watched him with attention. Finally, he went to the stable where he had tethered the buckskin and tossed an armful of grass into the manger of an adjoining stall. Then coming out, he dropped several handfuls of grass and one large bunch not far from the door.

He walked away then and continued his work. Occasionally, he glanced up. Zeke was suspicious.

"Might as well go on in, Zeke," he said, grinning at the old burro. "If yuh do, I'll make out to feed yuh. Ain't no other way yuh'll last out the winter, what little meat yuh've got on yore bones to begin with."

A long time later, he looked up to find that both the grass and the burro had vanished. "The last of the Jacksons," Matt Ben muttered, grinning. "Me and a jackass!"

He studied the sky grimly. Twenty miles north and east was the hideout of Stony Budd. The Budd gang had looted two banks, run off a bunch of fine saddle horses, and holed up here.

"Come along, Matt," Stony had said. "That's the old Jackson country. We can use you up there."

"Not me." he had told him. "I'm through with the outlaw trail. From now on I'm ridin' the straight an' narrow."

HE had meant it, too. There was food, security, and warmth up there with Stony Budd. All he had to do was swing aboard the buckskin and head out up the trail. Here, people would learn a Jackson had returned, and he would have to live down a hard name. Well, it was time a Jackson did live it down. Old Enoch would have agreed with that. Times had changed.

He would have been entirely in the clear but for that sheriff back in Carson. The man had tried to arrest him, and there had been no reason for it. The

sheriff, looking for a reputation, had figured taking a Jackson would give it to him. Matt Ben had been about willing to go when something in the man's snaky eyes changed his mind.

"Tell me what yuh want me for," he'd said quietly, "and I'll go. Otherwise, I'm settin' right here."

"I'm arrestin' yuh on suspicion," said the sheriff. "Now cut the palaver an' come on!"

"I'm not comin'," he'd said, and even as the words left his mouth he saw the sheriff's hand dip for his gun. That, he knew, had been the idea. The sheriff had wanted to kill him.

The sheriff didn't kill him. The sheriff of Carson drew much too slow for young Matt Ben Jackson, and so died with a bullet in his heart. And then Matt Ben rode out of town, circled, and took the trail to Horntown.

Matt Ben was frying bacon over a fire in the big fireplace when he heard a light step at the open door. The frying pan was in his left hand, a fork in his right. For an instant, he froze.

"Don't try it, son," Star Redman advised. "I don't want to kill yuh."

Matt Ben turned slowly and glanced up at the tall man standing inside the door. He took in the lean, rangy build, the quizzical blue-gray eyes, the white hair, and the white, drooping mustache.

"I reckon you must be Sheriff Redman," he commented. "Come in and set. Yuh lookin' for me?"

Redman stepped up quickly and flipped the right hand, then the left hand guns from Matt Ben's holsters. Then he ran his hands over him carefully, feeling for a concealed gun or a knife.

"Sorry, Jackson," Redman said. "I knowed yuh was here, but I didn't aim to bother yuh none until that wire come from Carson."

Jackson nodded.

"Firehat said yuh was square—and a fighter. So I reckon I'm plumb peaceful. Set, and we'll eat."

THRUSTING the guns into his waistband, Star Redman watched the young man preparing the meal. This Jackson was a tall, finely built man, with a fighter's face, and shrewd eyes that might have matched the sheriff's own.

"Mornin'll be soon enough to hit the trail, won't it?" Matt Ben suggested easily, as he put bacon and sourdough bread on the sheriff's plate.

"We'll start tonight," Redman said. "I don't want to stay in this place all night." Then he smiled. "No, it ain't ghosts, though there's a heap of Jackson ghosts hereabouts. It's snow. It's got the feel of it in the air."

"I reckon," Matt Ben agreed, "although I ain't so used to this country as you. Firehat told me about yuh. Told me about Horntown, too. Said it was rightly mine. That straight?"

"Reckon it is," Redman replied. "Enoch actually proved up on a claim here. So did seven of the others. I reckon yuh own most of this country for miles. Not that it's worth much."

Well, Matt Ben decided ruefully, this was it. He had hoped to live here in peace until he could whip the place into some kind of shape, and by hard work had hoped to establish himself so well that they would accept him on his own terms, as a peaceful rancher. If it hadn't been for that sheriff in Carson, he thought, things would have worked out. Still—there was always Stony Budd.

Stony Budd! A fire suddenly quickened within him. Well, why not? If he was to have the name he might as well take the profit. It was still a long way to Webb City. A lot of things could happen. The old sheriff might be a fighter, but with all his posse he couldn't crack the Jacksons. And he wouldn't crack this one now—not alone as he was.

Taking his time, Matt Ben put bacon on his own plate and seating himself, began to eat. He would need a gun.

Well, he had thought of that. He had planned for this in case it happened, although he had believed it would be trouble with Stony and his crowd. He wasn't fooling himself about Budd. The outlaw leader wanted him because he was gun slick, and because he was afraid that Jackson might start a gang of his own.

Stony Budd was a rustler and a pretty bad hombre. And fast, plenty fast. He had killed five men in gun fights, and all of them gun handlers.

Matt Ben had two guns hidden out. Two on which he could depend. There was a six-shooter hidden under a canvas in the manger where he stabled the buckskin. There was another wrapped in his slicker.

Outside the wind was picking up, they could hear it growing stronger.

"We better get movin'," Redman said, pushing back his plate. "It might be she'll be a bad storm."

Matt Ben got up and began throwing his few things together. He dumped some things into his warbag, and then walked over to pick up his slicker. As he stooped to pick it up, Star Redman spoke.

"If'n I was to have a hideout gun," he said casually, "I'd carry it in my slicker. So be careful, son."

Matt Ben straightened, the slicker in his hands. After all, Star Redman had shot many of his relatives. If he was to leap backward now and jerk out the gun, it would be an even break at worst. Then, he realized he couldn't kill the old man. He would wait. On the trail, there would be a chance. He could get away.

"Reckon yuh're a smart hombre, Redman," he answered. "I have got a gun here."

Star got up and took it from the opened package of the slicker and emptied the shells into his hand. His eyes were shrewd and thoughtful.

"Yuh could've come nigh to gittin' me, son," he admitted. "Of course, I was ready, and yuh can't tell. No, yuh can't never tell!"

Watched by the sheriff, Jackson went to the stable to get the buckskin. When inside and out of the sheriff's view, he slipped the gun from the manger into his shirt. He had already donned the slicker and the gun made no bulge that could be seen through its looseness.

After saddling the yellow horse he led him outside. Old Zeke watched, his eyes sad.

"I'll be back, old boy," he whispered to the gray burro. "I'm aimin' to settle down here in Horntown with you. Stick around close."

Mounting, he rode out of the town with Redman behind him. Once, when they turned toward the desert, he glanced back. The old gray burro was plodding after them.

STAR REDMAN stared at the sky, and Matt Ben could see the worry in his eyes. The air felt chill, but there was a certain suggestion of dampness in it, too. They had been riding for no more than an hour when Matt Ben felt a snowflake touch his cheek. Then another. Suddenly, the air was white with them.

"We'll keep goin'," Redman declared. "Mebbe it won't be bad."

Yet he worried. He knew what it could mean to be caught out in the flats of the Black Rock in a blizzard, and the snow was falling thickly now. There was little wind, and that was a blessing. They rode on, Matt Ben watching his chance. The snow was going to get worse. It was going to get much worse. There would be a chance to get away as, even now, fifty yards off the snow drew a curtain that would help his escape.

The horses moved on, but the snow was thickening underfoot. Matt Ben glanced back at their tracks. They were filling rapidly. With ten minutes start, a man could be free of any pursuit.

His face felt cold now, and suddenly he realized the wind was rising. A gust stirred the snow and momentarily blinded him, sucking his breath away.

"Gettin' plumb bad!" Redman shouted, and Matt Ben nodded his head and rode on.

Almost imperceptibly, he was widening the distance between them. A little more and he would be completely obscured by the falling snow. He let the yellow horse find his way into a steep gully. Here the snow had drifted and his buckskin picked its way delicately down the steep side into the ravine. A misstep here and a horse could break a leg.

He glanced around, then instantly went into action. The sheriff was still out of sight beyond the lip of the ravine. He touched spurs to the buckskin and raced through the snow up the ravine. After a momentary spurt, he let the yellow horse take his own pace. Behind him there was a shout, then another, and then another.

Matt Ben Jackson rode on. He reined the buckskin to a walk and looked back. His trail was already blotting out. He was free again.

When he had ridden a mile, he found a place where he could climb the yellow horse out of the ravine. But the minute his head went over the lip, a blast of icy wind struck him like a blow. They had been drifting ahead of the wind toward Webb City, now to return, he must face it.

Horntown was the safest place now. Once there he could have shelter and fuel. He could last out the storm, then light out for Stony Budd's, stop there a day or two, and head over into Wyoming.

The snow was falling thicker now, the wind still rising. He turned the yellow horse to cut back and hit his own trail. He knew the way they had come, and

some of that route had been sheltered. The old sheriff might return, yet Matt Ben doubted it. Star would wait until the storm abated, then come back, and probably with a posse. Matt Ben knew his escape had been the merest fluke.

He cut their trail near a rocky shoulder that offered some protection from the wind and got down to rest the buckskin. Then he saw the tracks. Here, sheltered from the wind, they had neither filled with snow nor blown away. And there, over the tracks of his horse and the sheriff's, were the unmistakable prints of the gray burro. It was strange the storm hadn't turned it back, he thought.

Matt Ben stared at the tracks, swearing under his breath. From here, it would be at least forty-five miles to Webb City. The old gray burro, last survivor of Horntown, would never make it. He would die out there on the snow covered desert. Yet the tracks indicated the burro was lagging well behind, for the horse tracks had already begun to fill before the sharper burro tracks were made.

"Matt Ben," he said softly, "yuh're a fool for what yuh're thinkin'!" Yet even as he said it, he knew he was going after that old burro. He was going to get Zeke and take him back to Horntown. No use letting the old fellow die out there alone. Around the town, with shelter, he might live several years.

He swung into the saddle and turned the buckskin down the trail. It was partly sheltered here, and there were occasional tracks. Several times he had to stop, judging the wind. He hoped it was holding from the north. It was a full hour later when he came again to the ravine where he had lost the sheriff.

Reining in, he slid from the saddle and took the gun from his shirt and thrust it into his waistband inside his slicker. Then he felt his way down the steep trail.

Putting his hand on a rock, he let himself down easily, and stood at the bottom of the trail.

Zeke was standing not six yards away, head down. Nearby, propped against the rock wall, was Star Redman. His head was slumped forward on his chest. Before him was a little bunch of sticks, beginning to be covered with snow. His horse stood a few feet to one side.

"What the devil?" Matt Ben asked himself. He stared for a long moment, then slowly began to walk toward the little group.

ZEKE heard him first, and lifted his head and canted his ears toward Matt Ben.

"It's all right, old boy," Jackson told him. "Everythin's all right!"

He bent over the sheriff, then shook him. Redman stirred, then winced sharply. Matt Ben glanced down. Star Redman's leg was twisted queerly.

"What happened?" Matt Ben demanded sharply.

"Hoss slipped comin' into the ravine," Redman said. "Fell with me, and busted my leg. Guess I must've passed out with the pain. She's shore hurtin'."

Matt Ben got up, swearing under his breath. Then he walked over and examined the sheriff's black. The horse was sound. He led it over to Redman.

"Can't leave yuh here," he growled harshly. "I'm takin' yuh back to Horntown."

He found a couple of longer sticks of mesquite and made a rough splint. Then he hoisted the sheriff into the saddle. The old man was surprisingly light for all his frame. Matt Ben looked at him again. He had the thought then that the sheriff was too old for this kind of life.

He climbed into his own saddle.

"Come on, Zeke," he said. "We're goin' back to Horntown!"

It was slow going. The wind was an icy blast now that stung their faces with frozen snow. The sheriff stayed in the saddle, but Jackson could see the older man was suffering. The horses leaned into the wind and plodded along through the fast deepening snow.

An hour later, Matt Ben reined in. Pulling his hat brim down, he squinted into the driving snow. He was chilled clean through. He slapped his hands together, then beat them on his legs. He walked around, rubbing the legs of the horses, and of old Zeke who now stood patiently, as though he had lived all his time with men instead of running wild for so long.

Then Matt Ben mounted and started on. It was a long time later when he stopped again. They were in the middle of a windswept expanse of driving snow. A white world bounded them, with visibility for no more than a few yards in any direction. Matt Ben sat his horse, cursing. He was lost. No question about it, he was lost.

They were going into the wind, and that should be right, he thought. But

suppose the wind had shifted? Even if it had shifted a little it could have caused them to miss the canyon mouth and go on past Horntown into the waste beyond.

The horses were of no help, as neither of them was from Horntown. Their natural inclination was to turn their tails to the wind, and in that direction there was fifty miles, at the very least, of windswept, snow-covered desert.

Suddenly, his eyes fell on Zeke. The old gray burro stood a few yards away, almost at right angles to their route, staring back at him.

On a hunch, he turned the buckskin and walked it toward Zeke. Almost immediately, as if waiting for that very thing, Zeke walked off, quartering into the wind.

"Hope yuh know where yuh're goin', old fella," Matt Ben muttered into his collar. "I don't."

But Zeke was obviously going somewhere. He was walking steadily ahead as though completely sure of his ground. What if the burro thought he was being driven that direction? Well, it was a chance, but that gray old animal was desert wise, and he had lived here for years, and it stood to reason he would head for some shelter.

"I hope!" Matt Ben added grimly.

Hours later, snow-covered, half-frozen, and numb with cold, the buckskin stumbled. Matt Ben, jerked from a half doze, looked up. The gray burro was walking straight ahead toward a jumble of unfamiliar rocks. Above the rocks towered a mountain. It might be one of the mountains behind Horntown!

But no, all this was unfamiliar, unknown to Jackson. He swung down and plodded ahead, leading his horse, the sheriff's black following by its lead rope to his own saddlehorn. His feet felt like great, shapeless things, and he plodded on, stumbling over stones.

Then suddenly, the wind was gone. Looking up again, he found the burro had led them into a narrow, rock-walled canyon. Yet it wasn't that. It was scarcely more than a huge crack in the mountain, and almost devoid of snow. Plodding on after the burro, he suddenly felt the wind again, and staring head, he saw they were entering the same white, endless whirl of snow they had left behind.

He stopped, unbelieving. There, dead ahead of him, were a cluster of snow-covered buildings, and beyond them another mountain.

Zeke was walking straight ahead. For Zeke knew exactly where he was going. He was returning to Horntown!

TWO hours later, a fire roaring in the huge fireplace of the Waterhole, Matt Ben looked over at Redman. The sheriff's face was drawn with pain.

"Hadn't been for that darned burro," Matt Ben said, "we'd of froze to death!"

"Yeah," Redman agreed dryly. "And if you hadn't been good-hearted enough to come back after him, I'd of froze to death! Yuh could've left me there, anyway."

"Huh?" Matt Ben stared at him sourly. "Wouldn't be no fun in that! Nobody to fight with then." He stirred the fire. "But yuh better get somebody to help yuh, Redman. Yuh're gettin' old for this sort of thing."

"How come yuh gunned down that Carson sheriff?" Redman demanded.

Briefly, Matt Ben explained.

"The law's got nothin' against me but that," he added. "I done a few things I shouldn't have done, but nobody can prove anythin'. I was through with all that."

"Mebbe we can find some witnesses," Redman suggested. "Somebody who will side yuh and show that sheriff pushed yuh into a fight. If he was after a rep, like yuh say, mebbe he talked some. Them kind usually does. And if he didn't have no charge against yuh, it bein' a fair shoot-out, maybe we can get yuh off."

The sheriff pulled at his mustache.

"Anyways," he added, "a man that will come back after a sheriff who took him prisoner ain't all bad." He continued to pull at the mustache, thoughtfully. "And, yuh know, I be needin' a right good deputy, somebody who can sling a gun, but ain't too anxious to go gunnin' folks."

Matt Ben got up and went out into the snow. The storm was growing worse. It might be days before they could get out. But the sheriff had some grub, and they would get by. At least, in the Waterhole it was warm and dry. He walked on out to the barn.

Zeke looked around at him when he came in. The horses were eating methodically of the grass which he'd piled into the mangers before he had been arrested.

Matt Ben walked up and ran his hand along Zeke's neck.

"Zeke, you old gray devil," he muttered, "looks like the Jacksons have come back to Horntown to stay!"

Lacy snapped a shot at the slinking logger and dropped him in his tracks

SHOWDOWN AND DRAW

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Nighthawk Jim Lacy dares the peril of death by torture as he tries to save ranchman Dean Carter from evil foes!

JIM LACY, nighthawk for the fall roundup outfit, shivered in his heavy mackinaw coat. A raw wind cut down through the passes of the Shosones. Jim swore softly. The cavvy horses were plenty spooky tonight. He could tell by the sharp jangle of the bells some of them wore that they were restless.

Jim again realized why Dean Carter, boss of the roundup, had assigned Jim, tophand cowboy, to the permanent job of nighthawk. Carter had known trouble might develop any time.

At first Jim thought prowling wolves could have startled the cavvy, but hardly had this thought occurred to him when he heard bit irons and the creak of saddle leather. He urged Baldy, his little bay, toward a clump of willows and was about to draw rein and scout around, when a shot blasted. Jim almost felt the wind of the bullet which screamed past his head. He jumped to the ground and drew his sixgun.

The lid had been blown off. Came a thunder of hoofs and the wild jangle of

horse bells which marked a hurricane stampede.

Jim Lacy now knew that human curly wolves had touched off the stampede. Hitching his bay to a willow clump, Jim moved off, catfooting it through the breaks, his gun ready to go into action. He moved some distance from Baldy when, suddenly, he heard the little bay snort. Jim swung and raced back the way he had come, but the drum of hoofs told him that he was too late. Baldy had been ridden off to join the pell mell tornado of the cavvy. Jim was afoot, three miles from camp.

He swore bitterly as he realized the bad situation of the roundup outfit now. Hitched to the bedwagon there were but five emergency mounts. The cattle at this stage required no night herding, but a roundup in mid swing without its cavvy was worse off than a covered wagon without wheels.

Jim Lacy hurried back to camp where he roused Dean Carter. As the straw boss, Lacy's friend, pulled on his boots, he explained the situation. Jim was remembering an incident which had occurred the day before they headed out to begin the roundup. At a Cody saloon, while he and Dean were sitting together at a table, a tall stranger, clad in the garb of a timberjack, had swaggered up to their table, causing Carter to frown. Jim had seen Dean's right hand slide down to hover over the butt of his Colt.

But the big stranger, who easily could have been mistaken, in a half light, for Dean himself, had made no hostile move. He'd just growled one word:

"Showdown."

LACY had seen the killer light in this big logger's eyes and had noted the counter challenging gleam from Carter's eyes.

"Was it the hombre who came up to our table at Cody, Dean, d'you think?" Lacy asked.

Dean Carter bit off a sizable chew of tobacco before replying. Old Chips Jones, the cook, had come out of his bedroll and was already starting to fan his breakfast fire.

Carter drew Lacy to one side.

"That big logger boss is Tull Grafton," Carter said. "He's doin' high flume loggin' up the North Fork. Here's the story about him: When my mother died while I was still a button, Dad brought a housekeeper to our spread on the Panhandle. She was Mrs. Grafton and with her she brought her son who was about my own age. He was Tull, the hombre you have in mind."

Carter paused to call out some instructions to the cook to prepare a trail sack of grub for three men. Then he turned back to Lacy.

"We growed up together, Jim. Just about the time his Ma died, Tull started to spread a rumor he was my dad's son. I questioned Dad about this and he denied it. I believed him. Then, when Dad died, Tull started in to cause trouble by claimin' half the estate. He carried his fight into the highest court. I tried to make him a good settlement, but he wasn't satisfied. Result was, it cost me nearly everything I owned. Had to sell the ranch to pay up expenses."

A tall young red-headed waddy, a member of the Shosone River Valley's Flying E outfit, lounged up, and Dean Carter asked him to make ready to ride. He was Phil Batten, a good friend of Lacy's, and Lacy was glad Phil was being included. But he wanted to hear more about this salty logger boss, Grafton.

"Wal, I never saw Tull again until once I was bossin' a big trail drive, and found him signed in by one outfit," Dean Carter said. "He got plumb ugly after a few days and we had to go for our guns. I gave him a fair chance to match my draw, but he couldn't, and I shot him up pretty bad. Never saw him again until just before roundup. I glimpsed him in the distance the day before he come up to our table in the saloon. He hates me plenty poisonous, Jim. Reckon it was him touched off the cavvy stampede. Tull done that just to bait me—like settin' a trap. Wal, we'd better eat a bite an' get goin' along that stampede trail."

They ate a breakfast of beefsteaks and hot biscuits dipped in gravy, washing it down with coffee. Dean Carter then tied the trail grub sack onto his saddle. He also made sure that his boys, Batten and Lacy, carried plenty of spare ammunition, then gave the signal to mount.

There were but two horses left. One rider would have to do the best he could watching the big cattle herd, while the other man rode back to the valley ranchers for help—hoping to get both men and horses.

When ready for the trail, Carter, Lacy and Batten mounted, and rode off, Dean Carter in the lead.

They stopped for lunch just beyond a sharply cleft pass. Below in a small meadow, where there was grass and water for their horses, they ate their dry lunch in silence. They had lost the cavvy tracks in the rock country above.

Jim Lacy was weary. He'd had no sleep the previous night and now, for so long as Dean elected to halt, Jim decided to snatch some sleep. He moved back to the shade of a willow clump and stretched himself out, his hat over his face. Shortly he was snoring.

Lacy's sleep was short lived. He was awakened by a kick in the ribs sector from a heavy booted foot. He came up with a start, his gun hand flashing down toward his holster. But he didn't make the draw, for he was looking into the black hole of a gun muzzle covering him.

Lacy looked sharply across to where Dean Carter and Phil Batten sat, their hands hoisted. They were covered by as salty looking a man as Jim Lacy had ever seen. And standing close by, leering at Carter, was Tull Grafton, deathly hatred spilling from his smouldering eyes.

Dean Carter and Phil Batten must have fallen asleep to have been jumped like this, Jim thought.

Lacy now shifted his glance to Dean. Tull Grafton had drawn in close to the big rancher. Jim surmised Grafton had planned something else than a swift death for Carter.

DEAN CARTER'S mouth curled in a strange smile—a smile of defiance.

"Wal, Tull," Carter at last drawled. "What now? You got the drop, suddenlike. Reckon you've got a scheme all figured out for puttin' me away, huh?"

"Don't sound off too smart, feller," Grafton said. "This thumb of mine can get plumb itchy to flick the hammer, at times."

"Yeah—like all yore other fingers," Carter said. But it was a mistake. Grafton swung a ham-like fist flush to Carter's mouth. Blood gushed. Jim Lacy lunged forward but remembered that threatening gun muzzle just in time.

Dean Carter spat blood from his mouth and shook his head.

"Okay, Tull," he said. "Reckon it's dealer's choice and you're dealin'. Just what are we playin' from now on?"

Lacy admired his friend's calm.

"It'll be a sort of plain, old-fashioned showdown draw, Dean," Grafton said. "Only, since I hold all four aces and the joker, you can't win, sabe?"

"Heap sabe, Tull. But why bother to deal? Just turn yore hand face up and get it over with. But about these boys here—they's no need for them to sit in at all. They never done you no harm—not that I ever harmed you either, for that matter. Remember, I gave you plenty of chance to match my draw when we shot it out that time."

An ugly snarl lifted Tull Grafton's lips. It was at this point that Lacy noticed the man's almost shapeless right hand, which was almost minus all fingers. Grafton was shaking it in Carter's face.

"This is part of what you did to me," Grafton bellowed. "It wasn't enough you nearly tore me in two with your first shot—you had to shoot again while I was fallin'. You plowed off half my hand and ripped open my arm, and for months I suffered aplenty. Now you're goin' to suffer some of the same torment. You ain't goin' to like it, Dean."

As Grafton concluded his remarks, he slashed Carter savagely across his already battered mouth with that bone-hard shapeless hand.

Dean Carter did not flinch. Blood oozing steadily from his mouth, he sat stolidly munching his eating tobacco. Lacy watched him closely. It was clear now that Dean was in for a bad time at Grafton's hands. Jim had seen enough to know Tull Grafton was a cold, designing killer who would stop at nothing to exact revenge. Dean Carter would suffer plenty.

As he watched Grafton, Jim Lacy became fired with grim and audacious desire. Dean was square and brave. They didn't come any better than Dean. He and Jim had planned to enter into partnership in a small cattle and horse spread they had already selected in the upland country of the Shosone River valley. Jim wanted to help him, but for the moment he couldn't figure out what to do.

He had no idea what was in store for all three of them, but he intended to play a careful hand in the grim game which lay ahead. Somehow, he knew not how at the moment, he must make a play to snatch Dean Carter from Grafton's hands. In the meantime, Jim despaired of what Dean might have to withstand in the prelude of torture Grafton had designed.

They now moved on—three captives, their hands secured by buckskin ties behind their backs. They rode up into steep-

ening country. In the fading glow of sunset's aftermath they reached the river camp of Tull Grafton and his salty crew of loggers along the North Fork.

Loggers poured out of a bunkhouse at their arrival. Jim Lacy started as he watched a dark-visaged, heavy-set man, evidently some kind of boss, swagger up to meet Grafton.

"Peavey Leclaire!" Jim told himself. He recalled a night at a Cheyenne saloon when Leclaire had boasted of having escaped from the hands of the famous Canadian North West Mounted Police. He claimed he'd been wanted for a double killing in the Quebec woods.

Grafton dismounted and he and Leclaire went into rapid fire conversation, conversation which brought a bright gleam to the eyes of the French-Canuck who chuckled, now and then, as he eyed Dean Carter.

COLD hatred mounted in Jim Lacy's heart. Soon he got another surprise. Lounging near by a small log cabin was a tall man Jim at once recognized as Sam Cullen who'd ridden line with him for the T Bar outfit north of Laramie. Sam Cullen had been accused of widelooping T Bar cattle, and working in with the rustling Wright Brothers. . . . Jim Lacy had saved his neck from a hempen necktie. He'd given the young waddy another chance, but here he was now denned up in a nest of grim killers.

"I'm goin' to work on you, feller," Jim Lacy breathed to himself, thinking of Cullen. "Somehow, I've got a hunch you're the weak link in the chain here, and that's just the thing I need to get us out of this jam."

Two mornings later, Jim Lacy and Phil Batten watched Dean Carter hoisted aboard a horse. He was being led away. Tull Grafton had begun his cruel design for slow death.

Sam Cullen brought breakfast to the remaining two captives at the log cabin. He brought sow-belly side meat and mush.

"An' I'd advise that you eat 'er all up," Cullen drawled. "The big boss give orders you're to be put to work. We got a lot to do here at the catch basin where the flume spills into the river, and farther downstream at the white water."

A strange smile toyed with Cullen's heavy mouth. It faded when Jim Lacy's steely glance caught his eyes and clung.

"So you're enjoyin' bein' a party to this business of killin', huh, Cullen?" Jim intoned. "You got a short memory. You've forgotten how, a few years back I saved your neck from stretchin' from a cottonwood limb. You remember that, don't you?"

Sam Cullen lunged forward, his hand raised to strike, but he checked the impulse. Something in Lacy's eyes, or perhaps fear of what Leclaire might do if he attacked these two men, stopped him.

"So it's Lacy!" he cried. "I wasn't shore till now. Well, Leclaire's got somethin' nice fixed up for you. Ever hear of Death's Rapids? Well, you will because you're goin' downstream with me—goin' to handle the boat. I got to see about the site for a dam at the Whitewater Bend. It won't be nice if you start any monkey business on the way. That water's plumb fast and tricky. Understand?" He leered at Jim and then struck him a sharp blow across the face with his fist.

Jim Lacy blinked across at Batten, whose face was pale with burning anger and hatred. Phil's hands were tied. That's the only thing which prevented him from attacking Cullen. More than once Jim Lacy had helped Phil out of a scrape in town, when salty loggers or half drunken cowhands had prodded him into fights. Phil's eyes were red-rimmed with fierce hatred for this hulking widelooper who had forgotten the man who had saved his neck for him.

Despite his cut lips, Jim was pleased at what Cullen had disclosed. Anything might happen along white water. At least Jim wouldn't be tied up. A glimmer of hope shone ahead.

As he ate his bacon and mush, he tried to formulate a plan for escape. Later he looked up at Cullen, who had returned from feeding Batten.

"Okay, Sam," he said softly. "So we go into the white water. I reckon there's somethin' behind this idea of me rowin' you down river. Grafton, Peavey Leclaire and you have got somethin' all planned out for Phil and me, huh?"

For a moment Lacy thought Cullen was going to strike him again, but instead, the hulking ex-cowboy turned and strode out.

Alone again, the two waddies eyed each other.

"Reckon mebbe we've got a chance, Phil," Jim said at last.

"Think so?" Phil Batten frowned. "Well, we'll need some luck, Jim. But let

me have it. At least, they haven't killed us yet. What's on yore mind?"

Lacy explained. He spoke of the river.

"The release of Dean Carter is my special problem, Phil," he said swiftly. "You knew Dean and I were goin' to start up together in the upland spread. Well, it's a cinch I can't do a thing to help Dean while I'm tied up. You heard Cullen say he was goin' to take me downstream, or that I was to row him down. You don't figure Cullen expects me to return, do you?"

BATTEN nodded. "Meanin' Grafton's plan is to send you down there, knowin' that you'll try to escape. Then he thinks Cullen will snuff you out and dump you into the white water?"

"Right, Phil. That's how I see it. I guess he'll have somethin' similar stacked up for you, so don't get ornery while I'm gone. Hang and rattle, no matter how tough the goin' is. There may be a chance for us. I'll have to figger somethin' out. I wonder what sort of mess the roundup outfit's in now! I been thinkin' about it a lot. The cattle, by this time, might be scattered throughout every break an' badland there is. Some of the smaller outfits are liable to go broke."

"Sure, sure, Jim," Batten cut in. "I'll lay low while you're gone. But if you don't come back with Cullen, I'm goin' to make my bid. I'll either go out fightin', or git clear to make a bid for Dean's release at the high flume camp."

Jim Lacy grinned. He and Dean Carter had planned on adding Phil Batten to their outfit as a tophand bronc buster.

For the rest of the day the men slept, or talked about a number of subjects. Tomorrow morning, Jim Lacy intended to make his big play for freedom, or die in the attempt. He lay thinking about Dean Carter and Grafton's possible design for Dean Carter's death. That high flume! Jim visualized Dean's body hurtling down the water chute, possibly with a run of logs. It was not a pleasant thought, yet Jim was sure Grafton could have no other purpose in mind in taking Carter up to the high woods camp.

Jim at last subsided in relaxed position on the pole bunk. Shortly afterward he fell asleep. . . .

"Daylight in the swamp, cowpokes!"

It was the sharp strident voice of Sam Cullen which awakened Lacy the following morning. Cullen had brought food, more mush and sow belly pork. He stood by, gun drawn, while the waddies ate. Now he grinned at Lacy, whose face was puffy and discolored.

"We're hittin' the river pronto, Lacy," Cullen growled. "Shove lots uh that bacon grease into yore innards. That fast water can be plenty tough if, by any chance, you get a duckin'."

Lacy nodded. He'd run fast water before, in his pioneer early youth. He'd logged and driven cattle through fast water and had handled canoes and boats before the advent of ferries.

"Keno, Cullen," he said. "I'm all set, I reckon. Guess there's no use tryin' to buy you off, huh? Could make it pretty profitable for you if you took the notion to cross up Grafton. Dean Carter would pitch in a sizable roll of dinero along with me, if you change sides."

"Shut up!" Cullen snapped sharply. "I ain't for sale." He now turned to Batten. "As for you, waddy—you'll be under the eye of Peavey Leclaire, and if you don't know how he got the handle, Peavey, let me tell you it wasn't through handlin' logs. He can do things with that spike, like a faller last year found out. That hombre's skull wouldn't be purty to look at now, if it could be fished out of the deep white water around Death's Rapids."

Chuckling thickly, Cullen withdrew.

"Nice company we'd dropped in on, Jim," Batten drawled. "It's plain to see these fellers hope we'll start some proddin', so's they'll have an excuse to kill us. Wal, here's bacon grease in your eye, pardner. Good luck, Jim. If you don't come back, I'll make a break. But I've got a hunch I'll be seein' you soon, in the Happy Huntin' Grounds."

Batten's voice had dropped to almost a whisper and he squeezed his eyelids tightly together. Plainly he'd given up all hope of ever seeing his friend Lacy again.

Soon Cullen came back. While another man covered him, Cullen searched Lacy for possible concealed weapons or any other article which might be used for lethal purposes. He ordered Jim out of doors ahead of him, and at the creek bank, they were met by Peavey Leclaire.

"All right—git aboard and grab the oars," Leclaire ordered, prodding Jim not too gently in the small of the back with the peavey spike.

"Sam he know what to do if you star' something," Peavey thundered darkly a

Jim Lacy settled himself midships at the oars.

CULLEN crouched down forward, sitting sidewise so he could watch both Jim and the current ahead. A man loaded a case of dynamite in the boat's stern, with a smaller box of detonators and a coil of fuse.

"That's part of yore job at the sharp bend, Lacy," Cullen said, chuckling. "You'll be a powder monkey." He nodded and the man on shore pushed the boat off.

Cullen was still laughing as the boat was caught by the current and almost snatched from Jim's control. But Jim was not afraid. In fact, this morning he had a friendly feeling for this mad stream whose water reared and galloped like a corralful of spooked range colts.

Jim maneuvered the boat carefully for what he figured was about eight miles. It had taken almost all his strength thus far and his arms ached from the constant strain of fighting the savage, whorling current.

Now the stream's banks had closed in somewhat, forcing the water into even faster, madder rushing.

"You'd better start ridin' her, cowpoke!" Cullen bellowed back at Jim.

Lacy shot a glance over his shoulder. He could see the bend ahead with its leaping, foaming white water. The roar of the almost trapped river ahead was now almost deafening. Jim's pulses began to race. But for a moment he craftily took her into slack water to regain his strength. Also, he wanted to steel his nerves for the final test—the test he had planned in a grim and desperate scheme for escape.

At last, with tightened lips and narrowed eyes, he thrust the craft back into the whorling current which hurtled the boat on, on savagely toward the rapids beyond.

Cullen yelled madly.

"Give 'er hard left oar. Hard—left—Lacy!"

Mouth set in a mirthless smile, Lacy gathered his feet under him and deliberately slacked off left oar. As the boat whirled about and hard over on its starboard beam, Jim hurled himself sidewise. He stepped hard down on the gunwale as he went overside, capsizing the boat, and spilling Cullen into the berserk stream.

Jim was instantly flung back hard against the side of the upturned boat. He secured a hand hold and clung for a time while he searched for Cullen. His had been an audacious move, and he shuddered as he thought of what might have happened had those detonators exploded against a rock.

Now Jim glimpsed Cullen swimming strongly toward the bow of the capsized craft. Cullen had still retained a hold on his sixgun.

Jim let go and dived. He came up on the far side of the boat gasping, fighting, fighting madly to stay in close. He gained another handhold and eased himself toward the bow.

Cullen had gotten a left hand hold and was clinging for his dear life. Slowly, Jim Lacy moved in closer—closer.

Suddenly Cullen half turned. He gasped and jerked up his gun arm. But Jim Lacy struck swiftly, savagely, hooking his right fist to Cullen's jaw. The gun cracked out a shot, but harmlessly. Now Jim reached in and caught the Colt as it slid from Cullen's limp fingers.

For a moment he watched Cullen's unconscious form, about to be caught in the main current. Jim Lacy was tempted to let him go. But instead he kicked forward, seized Cullen by the shirt. Then he began his fight against the devil water with one arm and his feet.

Twice he almost lost Cullen, but he made good recovery and at last, almost spent, reached slack water. He was almost too weary to drag the man ashore, but he made it and let Cullen lie like a water-logged maverick while he caught his own breath and rested.

At last Cullen stirred, retching violently as he disgorged water.

Lacy moved in and removed the laces from Cullen's high boots. With one of these he secured Cullen's ankles and his wrists and dragged him into the willow breaks.

"You can hang and rattle a while, you coyote," he muttered to the dazed man. "If everything goes all right, I'll have someone call and pick you up, an' listen . . . if'n anythin's happened to Dean Carter, you'll swing from a cottonwood limb, same's Leclaire an' Grafton."

RED-FACED, Cullen coughed and vomited, but now he looked up, wheezing.

"It's yore play, Lacy," he said weakly. "You made a smart play. Ketched me

plumb off guard. Wal, you'll likely not be in time to save Dean Carter. He's due down the flume tonight, so Leclaire told me. . . . But if you was to strike south from here about a mile, you'd mebbeso fetch up with your cavvy horses—some of 'em. They're in a boxed valley."

The man had started to blubber and Jim figured giving him the location of the cavvy was Cullen's bid for leniency.

New hope surged in Lacy's breast. He wondered if by any chance Baldy might be there at the boxed valley. Quivering with excitement, he turned and headed on through the breaks.

An hour later, Jim was running a hand over Baldy's sleek neck. The little bay had stood, while the rest of the broncs hustled off at Jim Lacy's approach.

"For this, I'll mebbe excuse Cullen a hangin'," Jim muttered. "That is, if I'm in time to do anythin' for Dean."

Thankful that the horse was naturally gentle, for he had neither saddle nor stirrups, Jim fixed an Indian bridle out of the long shoe string from Cullen's other boot, mounted and sent Baldy off toward the northwest.

As he rode, he had to make a swift decision respecting Phil Batten. Word must be gotten back to the ranch hands. The men now probably stalled along the back trail where they'd lost the cavvy's tracks.

Jim decided that he must first make a bid to release Batten and send him out for help on Baldy. Then, Lacy tightened his lips, he would foot it up to the high flume camp to search for Dean. As he thought of this, his heart was filled with misgiving. . . .

In the underbrush near the river camp, Jim made Baldy fast. Dreading what he might find, he crept toward the cabin at which he hoped Phil was still a prisoner.

Near the cabin, he froze as he glimpsed Peavey Leclaire moving toward the flume spill at the creek. Evidently the killer was making a final inspection of the flume.

It seemed an age before Leclaire finally turned and strode back toward the mess shack. Now Lacy moved swiftly to the cabin door which creaked as he shoved it inward. He wondered if any of the men at the mess shack had heard.

"Phil—Phil!" he called.

"Uh! Why, it's—it's you, Jim. How'd you get away?"

Lacy's pulses quickened. He darted in and found Phil secured to the bunk. Batten groaned as Jim half rolled him to start untying the thongs which bound him. Phil's face was puffed and discolored.

"It was Leclaire did this, Jim boy," Batten said weakly, as Jim raised him to a sitting position. "What now?"

"Baldy's out in the brush. You're ridin' him out for help. Our boys and mebbe the sheriff and a posse are searchin' not far back through the pass, Phil. Try and make it. I've got to hightail for the high flume camp and see what's happened to Dean. Come now, pardner."

Jim Lacy helped his battered friend out of doors in as tense a moment as he had ever known. Trouble could explode any second if an alarm was given, and Jim Lacy had only five cartridges in the gun he had taken from Cullen.

He helped Batten mount and wished him luck. As the little bay moved out along the back trail, Lacy took a deep breath. He could only hope for the best—Phil Batten was in pretty bad shape.

Turning, Lacy began his tortuous climb toward the woods camp to the northwest. His feet pained him and every so often he was forced to call a halt.

"Feet must be swollen," he mused. But he was afraid to take his boots off, for fear of not being able to put them back on.

He almost despaired of reaching Carter in time, for on his battered feet it had taken him until after sunset to get to his present position about a mile from the camp. He had no means of knowing whether Leclaire and his canthook men had beaten him to the flume camp.

ALMOST spent, he at last sighted the high flume head and looked beyond it to a tumbling cascade which spilled from a fissure in a sheer cliff wall.

"That's the water feed for the flume," he told himself and was thankful the water feed had not yet been turned into the flume.

Jim shuddered as again he thought of Tull Grafton's scheme for vengeance. He could see a skid of logs all ready at the flume's loading platform, logs ready to be broken out and sent chuting down, together with human cargo.

A cold half moon appeared mysteriously from behind the grim cliff backdrop as Lacy crept cautiously forward and up. He suddenly froze as he glimpsed the silhouette of a man at the skidway head. The man was talking to someone.

"Dean!" Jim gasped. "I'll bet they got him all trussed up ready for the trip."

Quivering in every muscle and nerve, Lacy tightened his grip on the gun and commenced the last of the stiff climb.

His body was bathed in sodden sweat when, at last, he reached the top level. For a long moment he leaned against a spruce tree bole breathing hard. He wondered how far Phil had gotten along the back trail, and he wondered if Dean were still alive.

Now he glimpsed the guard again. The man was stooped over, talking. This revived Jim's hope for Dean's safety.

"Purty soon—now—Carter," Jim heard.

Steeled by this revelation that Carter was alive, Jim moved forward, almost cutting off his breathing as he reached the log pile. He was stealing around its end when his foot broke through a piece of dry bark. It cracked sharply and the guard turned, snatching at a Winchester which leaned against a flume trestle. But Jim Lacy already was covering the logger with his Colt.

"Hold yore hand, feller," he warned. "Let go that rifle or I'll blow a hole in you." He advanced as the Winchester rolled down the man's legs to the ground.

Just then a feeble voice startled him. It came from off left, on the platform. Excitedly, Jim half turned, and in that instant the guard lunged and struck. Jim caught the movement, but not quickly enough to avoid entirely a swinging right hand which grazed his chin, rocking him off balance.

Lacy sharply recovered. Before the logger could follow up, Jim swung the barrel of his Colt across the logger's temple, dropping him in his tracks.

Whirling, Jim rushed to the prostrate, trussed form of Dean Carter. A half sob shook the young cowboy as he slit the buckskin thongs which secured Dean, using a knife he had snatched from the belt of the fallen guard. Dean Carter was in bad condition.

"Tull give me plenty, Jim," Carter said, as Lacy straightened up. "I never had a chance to fight back or defend myself. Jim, what'll we do now?"

Lacy didn't waste many words. He helped Carter to his feet and supported him until the weakened man could stand on his own power. Lacy had no intention of attempting to make a fight here.

Suddenly a booming voice sounded. It was Tull Grafton calling to the skidway guard. Lacy's heart leaped as he caught the rasping voice of Peavey Leclaire in answer.

"They're comin' in, Dean," Jim whispered hoarsely. "The whole curly wolf pack, an' we've got to get down to that camp, to the cover of the shacks. Come on, pardner, hold on. We'll take that side track down the clay bank there."

Half dragging his friend, who managed to cling to the Winchester, Jim Lacy picked a path down the clay and rock bank. He could hear Grafton booming orders to his men. A slow smile toyed with Lacy's mouth corners. Grafton was issuing orders to start feeding the flume.

But suddenly the smile was wiped from Jim's mouth. He and Dean had been obliged to expose themselves. They were seen. A rifle spanged.

It was Peavey Leclaire who had sounded the alarm.

LACY winced as a bullet socked hard into the clay bank, narrowly missing Carter's head.

"Come on now, Dean," he urged. "We've got to hit that little shack in the brush below there. Tighten your cinch, feller, and follow me!"

Jim leaped on down and Carter, scarcely knowing what he was doing, floundered on behind. They had barely hit the screening brush when a fusillade of shots blasted. Dean Carter's right leg buckled and he went to his knees. As Lacy turned, Dean was valiantly trying to crawl on.

"That one get you bad, Dean?" Lacy asked.

"Flesh crease high in the right thigh. It's plumb painful, but I'll be all right if there isn't too much bleedin'. Listen! They're comin' in, like a pack of river wolves. You'd better get to the cover of the cabin an' pick off a couple. I'll join you as soon as I've had a look-see at this leg."

Jim leaped swiftly through the brush toward the cover of the cabin. He jerked up his Colt and thumbed the hammer. A venturesome canthook man pitched forward, screaming. Conserving his fire, Jim waited, watching the open area carefully. He had but four shots left. Each one must be good.

Cold dawn light was beginning to crowd the moon.

A bullet smacked Lacy against the log wall. He winced from a sharp pain over his left ribs, felt sick with shock. But

slowly he turned, caught sight of a slinking logger and snapped out a shot. There was a crashing of the brush as the would-be killer spilled. Hearing a noise behind him, he turned. It was Dean Carter, limping toward him.

Tull Grafton was at the scene now. With a whispered word to Carter, Lacy turned and slid around the cabin to protect their left flank.

Lacy heard Dean's Winchester boom in rapid fire. He counted the shots and hoped Carter was not doing random snap shooting.

Lacy glimpsed the tall, angular form of Grafton creeping through a fringe of brush toward the cabin. His heart pumped madly. He, himself, was not in position to take Grafton, and there was no sign from Carter.

"Out of ammunition, I reckon," Lacy told himself in that brief, tense moment when it seemed the game was played out, and he and Dean had, after all, lost.

Now Grafton was rising from a crouch. Lacy took a half step forward, determined to chance a shot even at the risk of his own life, for he would have to expose himself to one of the other killers. His thumb was lifting the hammer when, suddenly, there was a double explosion. Lacy gasped as he saw Tull Grafton totter forward a few steps and then fall heavily to his face.

Swiftly now Lacy whipped around the cabin, his shirt soggy with blood. He found Carter draped across the hewn log step of the doorway and dragged him indoors.

A bunch of dry chips rattled outside. Lacy glimpsed the heavy-set form of Peavey Leclaire crawling toward the cabin. The killer was wounded, but he was coming in—coming in to make a last kill.

Icy fingers all at once traced a pattern along Jim Lacy's spine. He wondered if he had another cartridge left in his gun. There was no time to make an examination. He slowly raised the Colt, a savage hope pounding in his heart. He released the hammer and it detonated a live cartridge.

Exactly at that instant something seemed to explode in his brain. He spilled back, scarcely conscious that out of doors, almost across the prone form of his boss, Peavey Leclaire lay spread-eagled in death . . . .

Lacy leaned hard against a door jamb, breathing hard as he stared unseeingly into the open. The wild shouts of men, punctuated by the sharp crash of gunfire, partly revived him. He attempted to pull himself to his feet, but sank slowly back again, a slow smile gathering about his mouth as faint realization that help had come lanced his rapidly fading consciousness.

Then black night enfolded him and he slumped down, senseless.

* * * * *

OLD Chips Jones was frying trout at a Dutch oven. The roundup was over. The Flying E and other outfits from the valleys had rallied to send along help—men and horse stock. The cattle had been shipped.

Near by a camp tent, smoking idly, still in his bandages, Jim Lacy grinned at Dean Carter who lay sleeping in the shade of a clump of wolf willow. It would be some time before either Dean or Lacy would be fit for work, but they had played their hands well in that stern game of showdown and draw Tull Grafton had elected to deal.

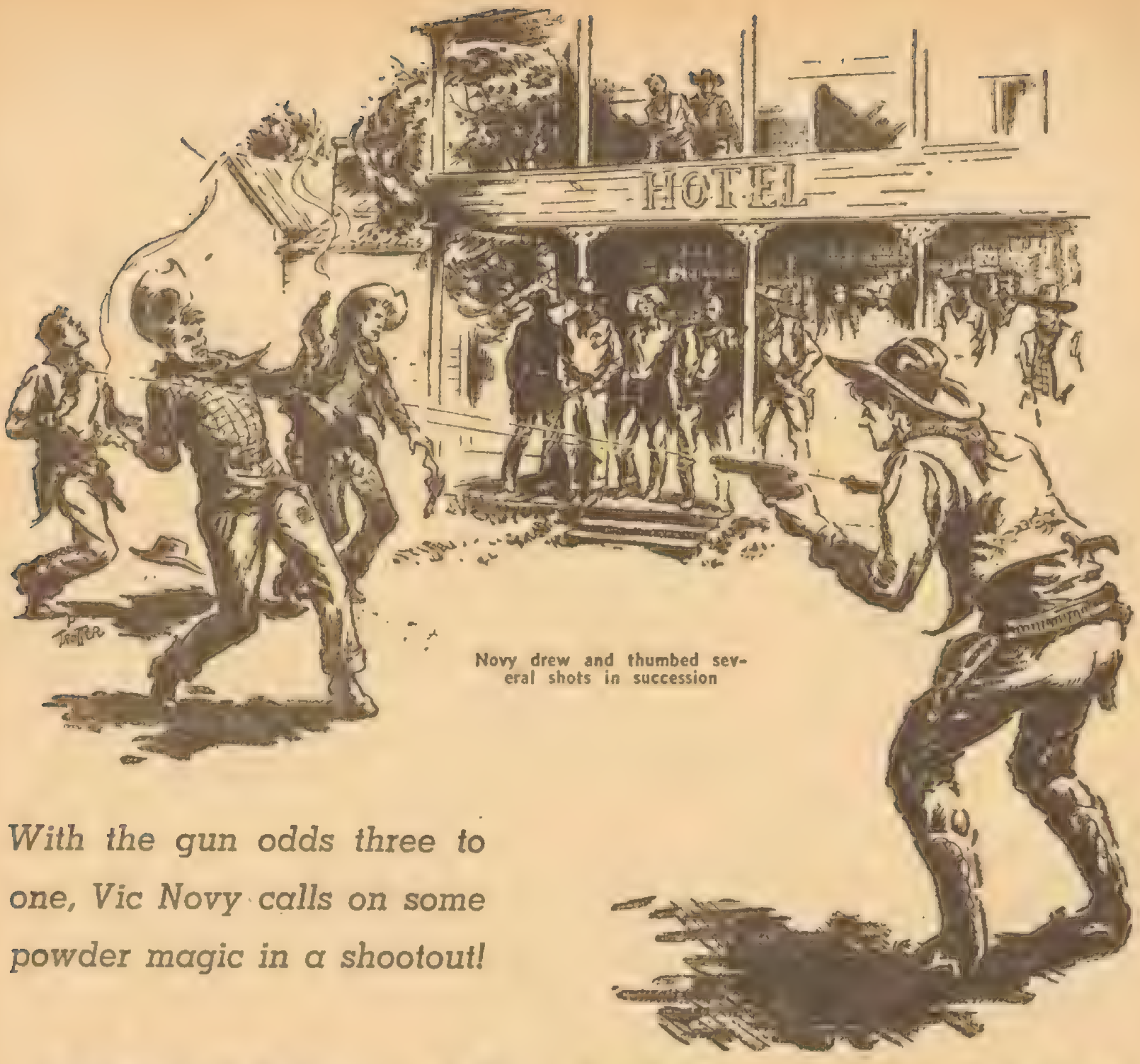
Jim and Dean had already purchased their uplands range spread. Phil Batten and Chips Jones, wrangler-cook, would form the nucleus of their tophand crew.

"Come'n git it, yuh danged cripples!" Chips at last bellowed.

Dean Carter cut a snore short and slowly sat up, grinning across at Lacy. He got to his feet, came over to Jim. Together they moved forward to commence a camp feed of fried trout with hot biscuits.

In another week they would move up into the parkland to take over a new spread. Chips hummed an old hoe-down tune through a mouthful of succulent, buttered trout. It was good watching his new bosses eat.

Fast, funny and furious—THE LAW OF AVERAGES, a complete novel by W. C. TUTTLE featuring those rollicking range sleuths, Speedy Smith and Tombstone Jones, in the March issue of our companion magazine EXCITING WESTERN—Now on sale everywhere, only 15c at all newsstands!



Novy drew and thumbed several shots in succession

With the gun odds three to one, Vic Novy calls on some powder magic in a shootout!

TROUBLE IS MY SHADOW

By LIONEL DAY

EXPERIENCE had taught Vic Novy that the most dangerous moment of all was the first one, when, on entering a strange town, he did not know his enemies.

There had been times in the recent past when he had been met at the station with a devil's hurricane of flying bullets. He was not courting a repetition of the occurrence. He kept well out of sight, therefore, in the last car of the train.

Still moving slowly after pulling out of Elkhorn, the train rounded a shallow bend and was hidden from the station by a stand of alders. Novy took quick advantage of the moment by stepping to the rail of the rear platform, pitching his suitcase overboard, and following it himself soon after.

He hit the cinders with practised ease, and after retrieving his luggage, walked back over the ties until the station was visible through the screen of alder branches. What he saw brought a faint smile to his lips. It was clear that his caution had again paid dividends.

A man bearing a shotgun under his arm stepped from the station cabin and walked quickly around to the shady side away from the glare of the afternoon sun. A moment later he was joined by two others.

Even at a distance, Vic Novy recognized their breed by the cautious way in which they moved and the care they took never to leave their backs unguarded. He felt a cer-

tain satisfaction, like a hunter who has sighted a prize, for they were the quarry he sought everlastingly. He waited until they moved away toward the center of town before he followed at a discreet distance.

As he stepped to the plank sidewalk of what was Elkhorn's main street, his blue eyes searched ahead with a constant wariness that was so much a part of him now as to seem instinctive. Caution was evident in his appearance, too, for he tried in all ways to attract as little attention to himself as possible.

His clothes were somber, though of good quality, and his manner was one of studied amiability. The only striking thing about him was the way he wore his two Colt .45 revolvers. They were belted with butts swung forward for cross-drawing.

This was the one thing to mark him as a professional gunfighter, or, at the very least, as one whose life depended upon uncommon skill with the six-gun.

The rut-carved road was hedged in solidly on both sides by paintless, false-fronted, commercial buildings. It led finally to a square that was dominated by a surprisingly well-constructed town hall.

As he walked, Novy studied the buildings. His stride quickened when he found the one he sought. It was a single-story frame structure that once had been a stable, and it was spanned across the top by a boldly lettered wooden sign:

THE ELKHORN SENTINEL—
MONTANA'S BIGGEST LITTLE PAPER

Novy saw at once that the windows were shuttered, a fact that surprised him. He knocked on the closed door with some hesitancy. Several moments later it opened a cautious six inches, and a feminine voice demanded sharply—

"Who are you, sir, and what do you want?"

"I'm looking for Joe Littany, if you please, ma'am," he answered civilly. "My name is Victor Novy."

THERE followed a moment of hesitant silence, after which the door swung wide, and he was asked to come in. He obeyed, keeping a hand warily on one of his guns. He found himself in semi-darkness, blinking owlishly at the black-garbed figure of a young woman. Even in the dim light of the hallway he could see that she was blond.

She turned, beckoned for him to follow, and led the way to a tastefully furnished parlor at the rear. Novy stood awkwardly in the doorway. When she faced him, his eyes widened in surprise.

For an instant everything faded from his vision but the detached image of her face. It was so like his dead mother's that his heart skipped a beat. He realized uneasily that he had never before in his life seen a woman who seemed so beautiful to him as this one with her sunny hair, cornflower-blue eyes, and lips that were as red as the wild roses back on the Wisconsin farm of his boyhood.

"Is there something wrong, Mr. Novy?" she asked, wide-eyed.

He started visibly, then looked away, a flush of embarrassment darkening his cheeks.

"Why no, ma'am," he mumbled. "It's just that I was expecting to find Joe Littany."

"I'm his sister, Marie," she interrupted quickly. "You see, Joe isn't here any more. He's— He was—killed."

"Killed!" he echoed incredulously. "But the telegram? It's only been a week since I got the telegram asking me to come."

"I know," she said quietly. "We buried Joe yesterday."

He saw at once that her grief was still a raw and open wound. He put his own shock aside, hunting vainly for the right words to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am—plumb sorry," he mumbled inadequately.

She drew a deep, quivering breath and waved a hand, as if to say that there was no time for grieving, that there were other, more pressingly important things to be done.

"Joe sent for you," she told him, "because there are some men here—three of them—of the kind that you hunt. We don't know yet if there's a reward. Joe wired to Billings to find out if they were wanted, but we haven't got an answer yet."

She broke off with a helpless shrug.

"It's true that I'm a professional bounty hunter, ma'am," Novy told her, "but the money don't figure much with me. I've got other reasons for doing the kind of work I do."

She flashed him a look that showed a new warmth and some puzzlement.

"I'm sorry that I didn't understand," she said.

She went on to explain why Joe Littany had sent for him, speaking hesitantly at first, and then with a rushing torrent of indignant words. Novy listened, spellbound. It was a story he had heard before, but it was one that never failed to rouse him to anger.

Marie told him how a man called "Honest Ed" Banastre had opened a dance hall and gambling casino some years back when Elkhorn had been a roaring boom camp at the

head of the westward-thrusting rails. After the railroad moved farther west, taking with it the reckless, exuberant, pay-rich railroad paddies, Honest Ed's profits had shrunk because of losing the cream of his customers.

Not content with just a normal profit from his place, Banastre had turned to politics as a means of keeping the bonanza of gold flowing into his already bulging coffers. His methods had been easy-going at first—genial bribery, with free drinks at his gaudy Crystal Palace Saloon. Then, as he gained power, he resorted to thinly concealed force. A man who stood against Banastre was sure sooner or later to be found brutally beaten in some dark alley.

Voting was made a farce. It was as much as a man's life was worth to cast a ballot against the Banastre political machine. Soon the town was completely in Banastre's hands.

Marie Littany explained all this to Novy. When she came to the part about her brother, she held her head proudly and did not seem to notice the tears that glittered on her cheeks.

"Joe stood squarely against Banastre with all the power of his newspaper and personal influence," she told him. "Banastre saw in Joe an arch-enemy, and when Joe formed a citizens' committee to fight him in the coming election, Banastre brought three desperados to town. One of them a man named Monte Sharps, forced Joe into a gun quarrel, and killed him. Joe was too proud to run away."

She stopped, a sob catching in her throat. Novy felt anger gathering in him like a storm. He stretched a hand toward her but withdrew it timidly before it touched her arm. He realized suddenly that he wanted more than anything in the world to right the terrible wrong that had been done to this blond girl and her brother. Joe was beyond his help, but—

"I'll be looking up this Sharps gent, ma'am," he told her gruffly. "I owe Joe more than I can ever repay, I reckon. You see, once when I was headed for bad trouble, Joe steered me straight. About this citizens' committee of Joe's, are they figuring to stand against Banastre even though Joe is gone?"

She nodded vigorously.

"If only those three gunmen can be kept away from the polls on election day, I'm sure we'll win. The people of Elkhorn are terribly sick of Banastre's crooked rule."

"When's the election, ma'am?"

Marie tried to make her voice sound confident and unafraid.

"Tomorrow!"

Novy smiled grimly. "That shore doesn't leave much time, ma'am. Where can I likely find Sharps and company?"

"Banastre's holding a pre-election rally at his saloon tonight. There'll be a crowd. There always is. They'll surely be there, but you mustn't go alone. I'll tell the others."

"I prefer to play my hand alone, ma'am. I'm not used to having folks help me. Kind of makes me nervous, I guess."

He said good-by then and left.

THERE was only one hotel in town, a two-story building with sagging verandas that stood opposite the ornate and wide-galleried Crystal Palace Saloon. Novy registered and was given a second-floor room.

He thought regretfully as he emptied the contents of his suitcase into the rickety bureau that his life had been a long succession of second-floor bedrooms. But always before this, the powerful drive of his life's purpose had kept him from seeing the drabness of his existence. He realized with a worried frown that his meeting with Marie Littany had much to do with his sudden change of outlook. Startlingly enough, Marie's blue eyes were threatening to crumble the very foundation of his life's purpose.

He told himself soberly that his only course was to leave town as soon as his job was done. He could see no place for a woman in the uncertain life of a professional bounty hunter. It was only his debt to Joe Littany, which was beyond all forgetting, that stopped him from boarding the next train out.

Novy spent the next two hours in drifting around town, asking seemingly casual questions. Everywhere he found seething resentment against Banastre, a resentment held in check now only by the fear of the imported gunmen.

It became clear to Novy that the job he had undertaken was a far larger one than just avenging the murder of Joe Littany. By clearing Elkhorn of Sharps and his two unholy assistants, he would be playing the part of a liberator—a role that appealed to him strongly for it made him feel that if he succeeded, he would not have lived in vain.

When the ruddy sunset was paling over the rolling line of the Beaverheads in the west, Novy sought out a small eating place, the windows of which overlooked Banastre's Crystal Palace Saloon.

Almost immediately, as dusk drew on, riders began coming to town from all directions. As he ate, Novy watched them tie their mounts at the long rails beside the Palace. He studied each comer curiously. They were, in the main, the simple folk who

made up the bulk of population in any Northwestern community—cowpunchers, homesteaders, hard-rock miners, hunters, and a liberal sprinkling of just plain drifters.

He waited until it was dark, and the oil lamps of the saloon made bright yellow rivers of light across the road. Then he crossed to the carved batwing doors and joined the steadily flowing stream of men that passed through them.

Steeped in the stern lore of his craft, he paused cautiously near the entrance and weighed every detail of the saloon's interior before advancing farther. He was particularly careful to mark the location of exits, windows, and secret places that might serve to hide a marksman. Finally satisfied that he was not walking into any immediate danger, he joined the jostling crowd.

At the far end of the saloon was a stage for entertainers, at the foot of which was an orchestra of a dozen pieces. Strung over the stage and reaching from wall to wall was a huge streamer bearing the red-lettered advice—

VOTE FOR HONEST ED OR DON'T VOTE!

The bluntness of Banastre's campaign slogan brought a grim smile to Novy's lips as he worked his way through the crowd.

There were rows of tables arranged before the stage. He chose one that gave a clear view of the saloon yet provided as well a solid wall for him to put his back against. It was such constant small precautions that kept a man of Novy's profession living.

He had not been seated long when his attention was drawn to a man who was approaching his table purposefully, a man of some importance, judging by the way the crowd opened a respectful path for him. Novy eased back from the table to leave room for drawing, if the need arose.

The stranger was a tall man, with powerful shoulders, thick legs, and a paunch that strained at the fastenings of his flowered vest. The mark of the tinhorn was unmistakable in the fancy cut of his clothes and the flash of too many diamonds on his chubby fingers.

He sat heavily opposite Novy and said without preamble—

"I'm Banastre. I know why yuh're here, and I don't like it. My boys missed yuh at the station, so I'm makin' the proposition personal. I'm willin' to talk yore lingo, mister."

"Which is?" Novy prompted, arching his eyebrows.

Banastre snorted knowingly.

"Yore kind savvies only two things—gold and lead. I'm offerin' yuh five hundred in cash to clear town until the election's over. What yuh do after that's yore own business."

"And if I don't clear, yore next offer is lead?"

"I didn't say that, pilgrim," Banastre protested quickly.

"But yuh're thinkin' it," Novy suggested.

"Mebbe. Will yuh take the cash?"

Novy smiled and shrugged.

"I'd like to think about it for a while. Mind if I stick around and see the show?"

BANASTRE banged a hand on the table and rose, smiling.

"Not at all, mister," he said with the satisfied air of a man who has done a delicate job well. "Stop at my office and collect on yore way out. And meanwhile, order anything yuh like. It's on the house."

With that he strode off into the crowd.

Soon after, the entertainment started with a troupe of thick-thighed dancing girls, who pranced onto the stage, singing lustily and making the boards groan with the vigor of their routine.

There followed several more acts, loud, lusty, and badly done. Then, after a fanfare of trumpets and roll of the drums, Banastre himself stepped out onto the stage. Striking a theatrical pose, he held up a hand for silence and launched immediately into his campaign speech.

He told the saloon throng as plainly as he dared that Honest Ed Banastre ran the town and expected to keep on running it until the hot place froze over. He said, further, that there were some who thought they could buck him and get away with it, but that these gents might soon be due for a long ride on a short rail. One of such folks, he bragged, was even now lying cold in his grave, all because he had been foolish enough to stand against Banastre. It was clear to all that he was referring to Joe Littany, former editor of the *Elkhorn Sentinel*.

Finally, as a climax to his speech, Banastre introduced Monte Sharps and his two partners. Dead silence fell as the three stalked dramatically to the center of the stage. Novy leaned forward with quickened interest.

Sharps was small and lean, with the easy grace of a cougar. His long fingers toyed nervously with the gleaming cartridges in his crossed belts. Novy noted with interest that all three wore their guns thonged low, with butts pointing back for the straight two-handed draw.

Banastre made an announcement in majestic tones—

"Gents, my good friend Monte Sharps here is goin' to give a little show of fancy shootin' for yore benefit. And I want you all to remember that Monte and his pals will be lookin' over yore shoulder tomorrow, askin' every man-jack to vote for Banastre."

Sharps advanced to the footlights and took a spread-legged, bent-kneed stance, with his hands hanging limply at his sides. He nodded to Banastre that he was ready. Banastre took a silver dollar from his pocket, held it up for all to see, and flipped it high into the air above the heads of the crowd.

Novy sucked in a startled breath as Sharps drew and fired both guns with a speed that was faster than the eye could follow. At the flame and thunder of the guns, the spinning coin was slammed against the rafters with terrific force, and dropped finally to the floor.

At the sound of the shots dozens of patrons had dived under tables, but they scrambled up now. One of them leaped onto a chair, holding up the battered silver dollar, and saying in an awestricken tone—

"He hit 'er dead center with both bar'ls, Sharps did."

As Sharps stepped back from the footlights, grinning triumphantly, Novy realized that the shooting demonstration had worked powerful magic on the crowd. The shadow of fear was on the faces of most men present, a fear powerful enough to keep them from the polls tomorrow, or force them to vote for Banastre.

They were not to be blamed, Novy told himself grimly, for Sharps' gun skill was almost beyond belief.

Novy saw clearly that if this moment passed unchallenged, then Joe Littany had died in vain. His citizens' committee would not be powerful enough to break the shackles of fear Sharps and his men had placed on the imaginations of the townspeople.

Dangerous and ill-timed though it might be, Novy realized that he must act at once in order to erase the impression left by Sharps' gun show. With quickening pulse he watched Banastre advance to mid-stage and raise a hand for quiet. The murmur of the crowd subsided.

Before Banastre had time to speak, Novy climbed a chair and said loudly enough to be heard throughout the saloon—

"Hold it, Banastre. If yore man Sharps is such a gun-wonder, then Joe Littany didn't stand a jig of a chance against him. Where I come from, we call that murder."

A gasp rose from the crowd, sounding like a breeze sighing through the rafters. For one incredulous instant nobody moved. And then, as at a signal, there was a mad, scrambling stampede for the exits. The crowd anticipated flying lead.

Sharps eased forward, walking cat-footed, his hands poised for a draw. Novy's own fingers curled close to his gun butts, and his eyes were slitted with the intensity of his concentration. Almost magically a space had opened in the crowd, forming a clear corridor from himself to the stage, where Banastre, Sharps, and his two gun-helpers stood.

Banastre's florid face was open-mouthed with surprise at the sudden turn of events. But when he saw Sharps getting set to draw, he recovered.

"Hold it, Monte. No shootin' in here."

Sharps swore without taking his eyes from Novy's face.

"Let me finish him now, boss. I can't miss at this range."

"Shut up, yuh fool!" Banastre snarled in a whisper. "That kind of talk'll bring the cavalry and martial law. Besides, if some of the crowd gets hurt, they may turn against me tomorrer. There's a better way, so keep yore shirt on."

WITH that, he waved a signal to those members of the orchestra who had not bolted. They delivered a fanfare of trumpets, and Banastre lifted his voice in a dramatic burst of oratory.

"Slow down and listen, gents," he bellowed. "This pilgrim here has just been rash enough to call Monte Sharps a murderer. Now Monte ain't one to have his honor dragged in the dust, so he's challengin' this stranger to a shoot-out. The time is noon tomorrer, and the place is the town square. Monte Sharps will be there, waitin', but will the stranger? I ask yuh, gents, will the stranger be there to take the consequences of his loose talk?"

It was Vic Novy's turn to be surprised. He had expected anything but this. Banastre's strategy amounted almost to a trap. If he fought Sharps and lost, or if he left town without fighting, Banastre would win the election because folks would think he was stronger than ever. Novy realized quickly that the only course left for him was to accept the challenge and pray that he would somehow be able to beat Sharps' gun-time.

"I'll be there," he promised. "That is, if some of yore handymen don't shoot me in the back first, Banastre."

Banastre laughed with mock heartiness, his fat jowls quivering.

"That won't be necessary, pilgrim. Monte never misses."

Novy saw by the gleam of triumph in Banastre's eyes that the man believed he had won the day. Well, perhaps he had, Novy admitted to himself as he stepped down from the chair. It didn't seem possible that any mortal could beat Sharps' lighting draw.

The crowd made way for him as he strode toward the batwings. As he walked among them, he was pleased to hear more than one fervently whispered word of encouragement.

Outside the night was fragrant with the heady smells of late summer. The stars hung so low it seemed that if he reached up, he could touch them. As he turned toward the hotel, he was reminded hauntingly of his boyhood and the nights he had lain in bed, watching the stars as they shone through the window, listening to the sweet music of the concertina as his father played old Polish love songs to his mother downstairs in the big farm kitchen.

Remembering his boyhood, he told himself sternly that if he died tomorrow, the dying would not have been in vain. He had always known that somewhere along the road he had chosen to follow he would die. Until then, there was only to keep on hating, hunting, and killing until his hour came.

Before he went to sleep that night, he carefully moved his bed to a position that was safe from a pistol shot fired through the door or a rifle shot through the window. He had learned the need for such precautions on other nights in other towns. The knowledge was so much a part of him now that he might have been born with it.

He awoke before the sun was an hour high, and he was pleased to see that the day would be warm and clear. He dressed with unusual care, for he liked to think that the clothes he wore on such occasions were fit to be married in or buried in.

Yet he found this morning different from all the others on which he had gone to face death. As he shaved before the wavy mirror over the washstand, he kept seeing the vision of Marie Littany's heart-shaped face, with her hair making golden ringlets on her forehead, and her blue eyes seeking his own with a warmth and vibrancy that stirred him in a way he had never known before.

It suddenly became clear to him that knowing Marie had put something in his breast that had never been there before—fear! With a small shock, he realized that he feared the coming meeting with Monte Sharps and his two pardners in evil. He wanted to live because of Marie. The thought unnerved him a little.

When he was completely ready, he stood before the window, looking out at the street and watching the morning shadows grow shorter as the sun climbed. And as he stood there, he turned this new and disquieting thing over and over in his mind, trying to see how it was possible to fit Marie into his life, if he lived at all after today. It just did not seem possible, and yet he wondered if there might not be a way to make it possible.

The soft knock on the door startled him. He jerked around as though at a shot, sucking in his breath and drawing his guns in a lightning-swift motion. He swore softly at this show of nerves, crossed cautiously to the door, and flung it open.

His eyes widened in astonishment, for Marie Littany stood in the doorway, hesitant and blushing.

He stepped back swiftly, holstering his guns.

"Why, ma'am! This is shore my lucky day."

She stood silent and unmoving in a paralysis of embarrassment. But finally the urgency of her errand drove her forward. She came into the room swiftly, reaching a hand toward him.

"I've just heard about the duel!" she told him breathlessly. "You've got to get away! They'll kill you! It's three against one!"

Vic Novy felt a sudden rush of warm feeling inside him as he saw how concerned she was over his safety.

"Don't you worry none about me, ma'am," he found himself saying. "I've been in tight spots before."

"There's a train leaving in half an hour. Be on it, Vic—Mr. Novy. Joe would have wanted it that way. He'd never have asked you to risk your life for him. He didn't believe in—"

"—in vengeance," Novy finished for her. "I know that, ma'am, but this is something else—something deep down inside that's a part of me. I'm not leaving, ma'am. That's final."

SHE looked at him wonderingly, and there was a new warmth in her eyes that made his heart skip a beat.

"You're a strange man, Victor Novy," she said. "Why won't you run away? After all, this isn't your fight. There's nothing to hold you here, not even money, because you're not sure of a reward. Why, then?"

The warmth of her glance melted the walls of his reserve, and suddenly with a torrent of words he never dreamed himself capable

of uttering, he found himself telling her why he hated so fiercely, and why he had devoted his life to hunting and killing men.

He told her how his father had come from Poland across the sea to seek in America the freedoms that were not to be found in the land of his birth. He told her how his father had sweated away the green years of his life in a Pittsburgh steel mill in order to save enough money to start a farm like the one he had left on the other side of the world.

He told her how his father had found the farm of his dreams in Wisconsin, how he had married a Swedish girl with golden hair and cornflower-blue eyes like Marie's. And then he told her how one night a man had come to his father's farm and tried to buy the fine green acres, and how his father had refused angrily.

He told her next how this man who had tried to buy the farm and failed, had hired other men to come and burn his father's barn—how his father had died in the flames trying to save his beloved livestock. And he told her how his golden-haired mother had grieved herself to a shadow and had been carried away by the fever.

And then he explained how he himself had gone mad and would have murdered the men who killed his father if not for Joe Littany. Joe, who was then a reporter for a Wisconsin newspaper, had stopped him from throwing his life away by showing him how he might avenge not only his father's death but also the terrible wrongs suffered by many other innocent people.

That was why, he told her, that he owed to Joe whatever life he had made for himself after the men responsible for his father's death had been captured and sentenced to life imprisonment. If not for Joe, he might have ended his days on a murderer's gallows.

"And so, ma'am," he said finally, "I became a bounty hunter, and that's why I won't run from the kind of men who killed Joe and my father. They're spoilers, ma'am, tryin' to ruin the land that my father came so far to find and learned to love so dearly. I'll never stop huntin' their breed. I guess trouble will be like my shadow until the day I die."

When he finished speaking, he saw with great surprise that Marie was crying. He took a step toward her and put out a comforting hand, but stopped short of touching her, feeling awkward, ill-at-ease, not knowing what to do or say.

Marie fumbled blindly in the handbag she carried and drew forth a sheaf of papers.

"These just came from Billings," she told him tremulously.

As he took them from her hand, she came forward swiftly, kissed him on the cheek, and then rushed from the room before he had quite realized what she had done.

Dumfounded, he stared down at the papers. They were reward dodgers. Monte Sharps' picture was on one of them, only his name was "Slim" Markwell, alias the "Silver Dollar Kid." He was wanted dead or alive for murder and train robbery. His two helpers were wanted on similar charges. The reward on all three totaled fifteen hundred dollars.

Novy rubbed the place on his cheek where Marie had kissed him and repeated softly over and over again: "Well I'll be doggoned!"

He left his room at ten minutes before noon, went downstairs, and out onto the street. The day was clear and warm, with the sun beating down from an almost cloudless sky.

After a brief glance around, he turned toward the town square and began walking with slow, measured steps that were gauged to carry him there at exactly noon. As he moved along, the details of the scene impressed him vividly.

At other times he might never have noticed the yapping of a distant dog, nor the whinny of horses that were tethered on side roads, safe from the danger of stray bullets. Nor the hawk that, high overhead, crossed and recrossed the dazzling disk of the sun. Nor the earthy and animal smells of the street.

He had never before been so acutely conscious of life, of living things, and of the universe around him.

As the distance to the square grew less and less, he became aware that the palms of his hands were sweaty, and that the beat of his heart had become a hard, metallic throbbing in his ears. He noticed, too, that his stomach muscles had grown hard, but quivered slightly as nervous tension mounted inside him.

These were all familiar sensations to him, but there was one that was not—the feeling of heart-squeezing regret at the thought of having to leave Marie. It was the first time in his career that the thought of dying so disturbed him, and it made this occasion different from all the others that had gone before.

HE PAUSED ten paces from the edge of the square to wipe the sweat from his palms. As he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, something dropped to the dust at his feet. He looked down at it idly, then

stooped to pick it up. It was a silver dollar.

He stared at it, frowning thoughtfully as he turned it over and over in his fingers. He was still holding the coin in his left hand when he stepped to the edge of the square several moments later.

He searched the scene before him with such care that it was as if he were looking through field glasses. Despite the danger of flying bullets, the square was crowded on all sides. Some dropped to the ground at his appearance, others hid behind the nearest barriers, but most of the onlookers did not budge. Novy thought fleetingly that they were sure the show would end at the first shot from Sharps' guns.

He stepped out into the square, moving with a bent-kneed gait so slow that it was a mere shuffling of one foot ahead of the other.

At the same instant, Monte Sharps stepped from the press of onlookers on the opposite side of the wide quadrangle. He too began a slow crablike inching ahead. Several yards behind him and fifteen feet apart came Sharps' two gun-helpers, ready to take over if he missed.

As Novy studied his adversaries, the fight-wise animal portion of his brain seemed to take over, and his identity slowly left him. He became a stalking brute-man of a hundred thousand years ago, closing warily for the kill. The part of him that was Victor Novy seemed to have gone to sleep somewhere in another world.

Sharps was only seventy feet away now.

He had slowed to a crawling pace.

Out of long habit Novy's right hand moved of its own accord to poise an inch above the butt of his left gun. Sharps saw the gesture and his own hands spread clawlike over his guns, but neither man drew.

The distance between them contracted with agonizing slowness. Sixty feet shrank to fifty, to forty-five, to forty—and then Novy's breath moaned in his throat as he spun the silver dollar into the air with his left hand.

Sharps yelled shrilly, fully aware that he had been tricked, but powerless to stop the fine reflexes he had spent so many hours of practice in training. He drew and fired both guns with a speed that seemed like an optical illusion. The coin was smashed from the air.

At the same instant, Novy drew and thumbed several shots in rapid succession.

Sharps' helpers went down like reeds in a wind in the very act of drawing their guns. But Sharps' next slug drove Novy's left leg from under him. He sprawled awkwardly, firing as he went down, but not daring to give up a gun to break his fall.

Sharps fired again, and the bullet slammed Novy's hat into the dust behind him. Vic lay prone on the ground now, and he propped his elbows in the dirt. Flame stabbed once more from his guns. Sharps uttered a sigh that could be heard throughout the square and pitched backward to the ground.

They lay without moving, all three of them, and Vic Novy struggled to a sitting position, reloading his guns at once from the store of cartridges in his belts.

* * * * *

Several days later as Novy lay in his hotel bed with his wounded leg propped on pillows, he glumly turned over in his mind the things he had to tell Marie when she made her usual morning visit.

With Sharps and company out of the way, the election had gone overwhelmingly against Banastre, who had then been arrested by the citizens' committee and held in jail for trial as a murder accomplice.

And now with Joe Littany's citizens' committee safely in the saddle, there was nothing to hold Vic in Elkhorn once his leg was healed. He rehearsed in his mind the words he would use to tell Marie that he was moving on and that there was no place for a woman in the uncertain life of a bounty hunter.

But when she arrived finally, radiant and bursting with her news and with sparks of sunlight dancing in her blue eyes, Vic Novy forgot what he had planned to say.

Marie sat on the edge of his bed and told him breathlessly—"The citizens' committee has just appointed you town marshal. Isn't that wonderful, Vic—Mr. Novy."

"Town marshal!" he echoed, stunned.

And then, like the unfolding of a panorama, he saw how the future would be. He would stay and keep Elkhorn free of the breed of two-legged wolves that had killed Joe and his father. He would keep his own precious piece of America free and unspoiled.

"I'll take the job," he told Marie, grinning.

He reached over and took her hand in his own tenderly.

She didn't withdraw it.

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With a speed faster than a rattler's strike, the stranger snatched the pistol out of Lieutenant Clark's hand

STRANGER FROM NOWHERE

By JAY MURPHY

A salty hombre goes into action when Captain Luke, bandit chief, raids the Seven Eight and abducts Laurie Kennicutt!

THE stranger, Laurie told herself, had been long in the saddle. The bayo coyote he rode dropped its head with a docility that was the product of weariness, not lack of spirit. The man's chivarras were cactus-scratched and his boots showed that he had walked beside his mount for at least part of the long way he had come.

He was tall in the stirrups and his red hair glinted at the sides of his head, under the wide-brimmed hat. He had an easy swinging motion in the kak, a part of the buckskin, horse and man an entity born of a long partnership.

He rode beside the drift fence, eyeing the rancheria speculatively until he reached the gate. There, he reined his pony in.

"He looks tired," Laurie said, as she rose from her chair. "It looks as though he's made a long journey since daybreak."

"Careful, Laurie," Old John cautioned. He passed a gnarled hand over his sweeping moustaches. "He's a stranger from nowhere. You mustn't be so free-handed with yore light-and-welcome's nowadays. Not with Cap'n Luke ridin'."

"That man can't be Captain Luke," Laurie protested. "Luke's a night rider

and this stranger is out in full daylight."

"You can't tell just *when* Cap'n Luke does ride," Old John said, with a shake of his grizzled head. "He rustles steers in broad daylight—leastwise that's the story I heered—and he holds up stages at night. Ain't nobody seen Cap'n Luke real close, nobody who lived to tell about it. You know yore daddy said to be right careful about strangers."

"This man looks hungry, though, John," Laurie said. "And his horse certainly needs water. When Dad took the herd up the trail, he didn't say anything about refusing to feed visitors."

She turned and lifted her head to call to the horseman who looked at the gallery with an inquisitive eye.

"Light and welcome, stranger," she called. "Birdie will take care of your horse. Birdie!"

There was reluctant movement in the shade of a yucca tree and a Navajo brave with a red band about his head moved out into the glaring sunlight. The buckskin shied as the Indian approached but the Navajo reached out a hand to stroke the bayo coyote's muzzle in a gesture that calmed the animal immediately.

"Ho, *keemosahbee,*" said the man on the tired pony.

"Ho," said the Indian, impassively. "You come long way."

"Long way," the rider agreed. He looked up toward the rancheria's gallery again and lowered his voice. "You see Sheriff-man here today?"

The Navajo's brown eyes stared up at him expressionlessly.

"No," the Indian said. He gentled the horse as the man swung down from the saddle. "No Sheriff here. Sheriff in hills, hunting Captain Luke, likely."

FOR an instant the stranger teetered on his high heels and then bent to whip at the alkali dust that coated his chaps with his flat-crowned sombrero.

"Captain Luke-man, he's ridin' around hereabouts?" he asked.

The brave grunted.

"Him ride plenty," Birdie said. "Him ride this country two-three weeks, now. Kill plenty men, steal plenty stock. Him bad. Soldiers from big fort hunting him, never see him. Soldier here, Captain Luke there—soldier there, Captain Luke here."

The red haired stranger nodded and looked up toward the levee again. What he saw obviously did not displease him. Laurie was standing at the top of the steps, making a pretty figure there in the flat sunlight, in her short fringed split skirt of suave doeskin and her pale blue silk blouse. Her hair was bound around her head in thick braids and her skin was tanned deep brown from the sun and wind.

From his corner on the veranda, Old John looked at the girl and told himself again that Henry Kennicutt had been a fool to leave his daughter behind on the Seven Eight spread when he had driven his herd north, with all his hands. True, it was a long, gruelling journey but with Captain Luke riding the hills and ready to swoop down without warning, a girl would be safer on the trail, with her father, than on the ranch, guarded only by an old man.

The stranger approached the foot of the steps, hat in hand. His brown face was split by a white-toothed grin as he said:

"Ma'am, my name's Jeff Read and I'm lookin' for a place to hang my saddle. I'm a fair hand, as I've got letters to prove, and maybe you'd be needin' a rider."

"Sit down, Jeff Read," Laurie invited. "I'm Laurie Kennicutt and my father's away, on the trail. We do need a hand. Lately, all we've been getting have been drifters, deserters from both armies. You're not a deserter, I hope."

Read shook his head, his grin widening.

"And do you think I'd be admittin' it if I was?" he asked, easily. "They got a pretty good price offered for deserters, I hear. But, no ma'am, I'm not a deserter."

Old John stirred in his chair.

"You got papers to prove that, I hope," he said. "Though papers don't mean much, I hear. You can buy Union or Confed'rate papers at Fort Smith for twenty dollars silver, it's reported."

The red haired man shot Old John an icy glance from his pale blue eyes.

"I paid a lot more'n twenty dollars for the papers I carry, mister," he said. "I paid for these papers with a minie-ball through the shoulder at Cold Harbor."

"Which side?" Old John asked, bluntly. "Which side were you fightin' for when you got hurt?"

Jeff Read leaned down to brush at his chaps again with the hat he held in one hand. His eyes were faintly troubled when he raised them to meet Laurie's.

"Well, ma'am," he said, almost lamely, "I don't know exactly what your feelin's

are about the war. The way I figger, folks have a right to their own opinion as to what's right and what's wrong and, so long as a man's sincere in what he believes in, that's all which counts."

"I—I feel that way, too," Laurie said. "You'll have to excuse Old John's question about which side you're on. He feels pretty bitter about the war, sometimes."

"Got a right to," Old John grumbled. "Lost two sons at Second Bull Run."

"But we're—we're neutral," the girl said. "We came out here a long time before those hot-heads in South Carolina decided they'd kick up a fuss to prove they were better than the rest."

"Laurie!" Old John said, reprovingly.

"Well, it's true," Laurie said, her chin lifting. "Just because Daddy's been selling steers to the Confederate Army doesn't mean that I have to knuckle under."

"Laurie!"

There was a pregnant silence as the girl caught herself, raised a hand to her lips. For a moment, she gazed fearfully at the tall, red haired stranger, her eyes filled with dismay. Jeff Read looked down at his feet in embarrassment.

"I didn't hear a thing, ma'am," he said, earnestly. "Not a thing."

From his corner, Old John gave a grunt.

"Well, I guess you know where we stand now. If you're a Yankee spy, you'll probably get a raise in rank for this information. The commandant at the fort will be plumb tickled to find out where Henry Kennicutt is sellin' his cattle."

READ shook his head slowly, then turned to Laurie.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "I'd better be ridin' on. I wouldn't want to stay here, with the old gentleman suspicionin' me that way."

The girl put a hand on Read's arm with an impulsive gesture.

"No," she said, firmly. "He doesn't mean what he says. You're tired and your horse needs rest and you're welcome here at Seven Eight ranch. Daddy would never forgive me if I let you go without your sitting down at our dinner table, at least. And the next rancheria, Tom Gill's Bar U Bar, is a long pace down the road."

The red haired stranger's grin returned slowly.

[*Turn page*]

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"That's right kind of you," he said. "I *am* tired and I'd mightily appreciate your takin' care of my hoss. But about the war —I did my fightin' and I'm through with it, for the time bein', anyway. And if I'm a Yankee spy, like the old gentleman seems to think, why, I'm the sorriest spy that ever came down the road, lookin' for a handout."

He had, Laurie told herself, the whitest teeth of any man she ever had seen.

"But aren't you takin' a chance?" the stranger asked. "For all you know, I might be this Captain Luke everybody's talkin' about."

"Just what I was tellin' Miss Laurie," said Old John, bluntly. "He hit Bar U Bar night afore last and took more'n a hundred head out of Tom Gill's herd. Killed a rider, too, when the durned fool tried to stop him. He's a killer, that man, and his whole gang is a bunch of killers, too. Anybody that tries to throw rope on that gang is askin' for a bullet between the eyes."

"But haven't they ever seen him?" Jeff Read asked. "Hasn't anybody any idea what he looks like?"

"Not him!" Old John scoffed. "Any hombre who gets close enough to Cap'n Luke to see him is close enough to get shot. Some say he's a respectable rancher by day and a rustler by night. Others say he's a renegade Confed'rate and there's some that swear he's a cast-off from John Brown's rebel bunch up in Kansas. Ain't no tellin' just who he is nor what he looks like. He might be—well, he might be the commandant at the fort, for all anybody knows. Or he might be you."

The red haired man's eyes held Old John's in a level stare.

"Or you," he suggested.

The old man in the corner of the veranda flushed with anger and his voice was biting as he replied.

"Ain't much danger of it bein' me," he said. "I ain't rode a hoss in three years, ever since my bushtail turned spooky on me and never thought to let me know about it. Busted both legs on me afore I found out he'd changed into a bull-windy."

Jeff Read glanced at the canes propped against the chair in which the old man sat and winced visibly.

"Plumb sorry," he said. "Didn't see you'd been busted up, like that. I'll take back what I said—oh-oh!"

The stranger's eyes were fixed on an approaching cloud of dust that marked the movement of a column of horsemen. Then, suddenly, the stranger out of nowhere was leaping swiftly for cover. His lean figure went over the veranda rail and was gone through the high grass on the far side of the rancho.

"Might be Cap'n Luke, at that," Old John said, as though to himself. "He shore wanted out of here in a hurry, once he saw them Union cavalry troops."

"He's not," Laurie said, decisively. "I just know he's not an outlaw."

The troop of blue-clad cavalry jogged up the lane. The troop leader's hand shot up to halt the column and the cavalcade came to a stop. The dusty officer in the van of the file lowered himself from the saddle, tossed the reins to his orderly, and stumped toward the ranchhouse veranda on his high heels. He paused when he saw the girl and then his black hat with its gold cord swept down from his head in a gallant gesture.

"Good morning, miss," he said. "Who could have guessed that Wyoming Territory could be so beautiful?"

"Good morning, Lieutenant," Laurie said. "What brings you out this way on such a hot day?"

The lieutenant was young and curly-headed. As he pulled off a gauntlet, his eyes enveloped the slight figure in the fringed skirt and blue blouse and dwelt lingeringly on the girl's shoulders before he answered.

"I'm looking for a deserter," he announced. "A handsome gent with red hair. Headquarters thinks he might be Captain Luke."

LAURIE'S voice caught in her throat as she tried to answer the unspoken question in the young lieutenant's voice. Old John stirred restlessly in his chair.

"Red hair?" the old man asked.

"Ah, good morning," the lieutenant said, turning. "Didn't see you, sir. This deserter? Well, he's a tall man, with red hair. Name of Read. Got a description of him by telegraph from Fort Smith this morning, at the crack of dawn, and the Commandant promptly routed out the entire fort to look for him. It seems this particular gentleman was a major in

Woolley's troop in Cheyenne and, apparently, he made off with the troop funds when he skipped."

"A thief!" the girl said, involuntarily.

Lieutenant Clark laughed, as he shook his head.

"But why am I telling you this?" he asked. "An old Southern sympathizer like you wouldn't tell me if you had this deserter hiding under your chair, would you?"

"No," said Old John, flatly. "No, I wouldn't."

"Uh-huh," the cavalry officer said. "I thought not. And I just happened to notice a new buckskin in your corral, Miss Kennicutt. Been buying some stock?"

Laurie flushed painfully under the probing gaze of the man in blue.

"Well—er—no," she admitted. "Not that I know of."

"A funny thing about that buckskin," Lieutenant Clark went on. "We've been keeping a pretty close eye on horses hereabouts, trying to get a line on Captain Luke, as this outlaw calls himself. From what I've been able to find out, this Captain Luke rides a buckskin."

"Who told you that?" Old John queried. "Didn't think anybody ever had got close enough to him to tell what kind of hoss he traveled on."

"We have ways of getting information," Clark said, easily. He turned and shouted toward the column of troopers who sat their horses in the lane.

"Surround this place!" he cried. "Look out for a tall, red-headed stranger. Don't take chances. He is either this man Read or Captain Luke, or both."

"Really!" Laurie said. "Don't you think you're going a little too far, Lieutenant?"

Old John reached for his canes and staggered to his feet.

"If I was a younger man, you wouldn't dare to act like this!" he spluttered.

"Sit down," Lieutenant Clark said, in a stern voice. The snap of his wedge shaped black holster clicked as he dragged out his heavy Colt. "Believe me, Miss Kennicutt, I don't like to do this. But we picked up the trail of a man answering our description of Jeff Read—*Major* Jeff Read—at a water hole about fifteen miles from here. We've traced him here."

He raised his voice.

[*Turn page*]

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"If he's within hearing distance," he called, "he can surrender himself and give his parole and save this lady embarrassment."

There was a brief silence, broken only by the sound of the hoofs of the cavalry horses, being deployed around the rancheria. Next a quiet voice spoke.

"All right, Lieutenant," it said. "I'm coming out."

The stranger walked through the front door, his hands held at shoulder level. His lean face was stern, his mouth a thin line, as he strode toward the cavalry officer. His eyes shifted past Clark's shoulder, toward the place where the officer's orderly stood, his hands on the reins of his own mount and the lieutenant's.

Clark passed his free hand over the other man's clothes in a practised gesture, then stepped back. His thumb held back the hammer of the heavy gun he carried and his eyes were watchful.

"I'd advise you not to try anything, Major," he said, carefully. "My orders were to bring you in, dead or alive."

Jeff Read nodded, almost casually, his eyes still on that cavalryman holding the two horses.

"And if you're thinking of making a break for it," Lieutenant Clark went on, "I'll only say that I have no compunctions about shooting down a *deserter*."

Jeff Read shifted his eyes to smile into the face of the earnest young man holding the gun.

"I wonder," he said, thoughtfully, "just how your family made the political connections that got you stationed out here, Lieutenant, where there's no fighting going on?"

CLARK'S face blazed.

"You dog!" he rapped out. His hand, holding the wide-sleeved gauntlet, flashed up and there was the crack of leather as it hit Jeff Read's face. It was then that the red haired stranger moved with a speed faster than a rattler's strike.

His hands came down. In one second, the Colt was out of the Lieutenant's hand and in Read's. The tall man's leg crooked behind Clark's and the punch toppled the Union officer over on his back.

"Get down!" Read commanded and, obediently, Laurie dropped to the floor of the levee.

There were two quick shots from the corner of the porch and the horses the Lieutenant's orderly was holding danced as dust puffed about their feet. The orderly clung to the bridle reins, tugging at his gun at the same time. He was off balance when the tall man reached him and he collapsed with a dull groan as the gun barrel cracked against his head.

Read vaulted into the saddle of the near horse, whirled the animal on its haunches and leaned far over the pinto's neck as he shook the animal down the lane. From the rear of the house came the indignant bark of a carbine, another.

"Get him!" Lieutenant Clark yelled. "A hundred dollars gold to the man who gets him!"

There was the thunder of hoofs as the cavalrymen went racing out of the rancheria's yard. The bark of the carbines sounded again, once, twice. Then there was silence except for the hammer of horses' hoofs, fading into the distance.

"They'll never ketch that man," Old John cackled. "They'll never ketch Cap'n Luke."

Lieutenant Clark was climbing to his feet, brushing the dust from his uniform. His face was stiff with humiliation as he spoke to Laurie.

"Miss Kennicutt, I'm sorry, but I'll have to report this," he said, in a frozen voice. "You've harbored a deserter from the United States Army, a man who very well could be this Captain Luke. Your foreman, Old John, used a gun against United States troops, which is an offense in itself. Your Southern sympathies are notorious in this region, and it's known, too, that your father is selling beef-cattle to the Confederates. We've overlooked a great deal, but I'm afraid we can't overlook this."

"Am I to consider myself under arrest?" Laurie asked, her chin lifting.

"The gal didn't have nothin' to do with it," Old John protested. "Her daddy's away and this stranger just rode in here, that's all."

"And you just made sure he reached my orderly before the man could draw his gun," Lieutenant Clark said. "You fired twice. And I'll take your gun, please."

He reached out his hand and, slowly,

[*Turn page*]

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Old John placed the gun in the outstretched palm.

"Don't!" Laurie cried, instinctively. "John, don't give him your gun!"

It was too late. The young Lieutenant had the piece by then and had reversed it quickly in his hand. He pointed it now at the elderly man he had taken it from. With the gun's muzzle held squarely on the old foreman's head, he reached forward and snatched up the two canes, tossed them over the railing of the gallery.

"Birdie!" Laurie cried.

"Careful," Lieutenant Clark warned.

"You devil!" Old John burst out. "Now I know you! You're—him!"

Clark's smile was an evil grin as he nodded.

"Right, old man," he said. "But you're not going to live to tell it to anybody. Yes, I'm Captain Luke. Union cavalry uniforms come cheap, John, and a gang can travel over the country without being asked questions, so long as they have a troop guidon with them. Most of my bunch really were Union cavalry, although I have a few Johnny Rebs with me."

He reached out a long arm and gathered a struggling Laurie to him.

"And now, I'm going to have a female Johnny Reb with me," he announced. "She may not like the idea, at the start, but she'll get used to it."

His face swooped down to place a brief kiss on Laurie's cheek. The girl's hand came up and the slap sounded resoundingly. Clark laughed and leaned forward to kiss Laurie again.

"I'm going to own all this Wyoming Territory before I'm through," he boasted. "I'm going to—you would, would you!"

THE gun in his hand spoke briefly. Old John's Bowie knife clacked to the floor as the ranch foreman slumped in his chair, as a red hole in his left arm gushed blood.

"Birdie!" Laurie cried.

"There's your Indian," Clark said, as he pulled Laurie close to him. He moved backward across the porch, pulling the girl with him. The man whom Jeff had felled lay in the sun-whitened alkali dust of the lane, motionless, the horse that Jeff had not taken standing over him with downcast head.

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Birdie came around the corner of the house, the red band about his plaited black hair showing bright in the sun. Captain Luke's revolver belched and wood splintered beside the Indian's head. Birdie dropped to the ground and was gone, like a long, coppery snake.

Captain Luke cursed, as he dragged Laurie down the steps, and across the yard to the horse that was waiting. The outlaw held his gun ready, fearful of a reappearance of the Indian.

With ungentle hands he slung Laurie across the uneasy stallion. The saddle's pommel bruised her back as she struggled to get free of the man who was holding her.

"Let me go!" she panted.

His hand whip-cracked across her face, leaving her stunned, with a trickle of warmth starting from one corner of her mouth.

"Shut up," the man ordered. There was the creak of leather as he raised himself to the saddle and felt for the sudaderos. The pinto wheeled and then reared as the man on the ground raised a wail.

"Y'ain't gonna leave me, boss," the outlaw cried, raising himself from the ground with an effort. "Y'can't do that! Take me with you, boss! I'll tell who you are, if you don't."

There was the crash of the gun. The man on the ground arched himself and then kicked at the ground spasmodically.

"That's what I do to those who threaten me," "Lieutenant Clark" said to Laurie. "And that's what I'll do to you, my dear, in time."

"Kill me now," Laurie said, in a low voice. "Surely, you don't like to torture people!"

"It's only fun if you holler," the man in the Union uniform said. "So go on and bite your lips, to keep from yelling."

The shot screamed over. The pinto made motions as though he were going to bolt. Captain Luke reined up hard, then leaned over the horse's head.

"Your Indian!" he said, bitterly. "The only good Indian—is a dead Indian."

He snapped a shot at the Navajo and grunted as he saw the slug miss its mark. The pinto shot forward as the Lieutenant spurred the mount's flanks deeply. Like a scared rabbit, the pinto dashed down the lane, the young man in the blue uni-

[*Turn page*]

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form clinging to the girl to prevent her from slipping from her precarious perch over the mount's withers. The jolt of the horse's gait jarred the breath from Laurie and, as she clung to the bridle, she felt utterly at the mercy of this young man with the devil's own smile.

"Lie still," he commanded, roughly.

He used a rude hand to turn his horse off the lane, onto the flat prairie that stretched for miles around in all directions. Laurie tried to keep an idea of the direction the horse was taking but her bobbing head found it impossible to follow the path of the pinto. Her brain swam and dizziness swamped her mind. She was conscious only of the outlaw's hand on the small of her back and the pulsing thud of the pony's irons.

"John!" she wailed. "Birdie!"

She lost consciousness, then, and when she awakened, out of the troubled dream that had assailed her, she found herself lying on a grassy bank, beside a waterhole surrounded by cottonwood trees. The pinto grazed nearby, hobbled and muzzled. Captain Luke looked toward her, as she stirred, and smiled.

"Enjoy your faint?" he asked, pleasantly.

Laurie got to her feet and swayed dizzily, for an instant, before she found her balance.

"My father will kill you for this," she said, evenly. "No matter where you hide, he'll find you."

"Shut up!" the young man in the blue uniform snapped.

His smile was twisted and mirthless as he made his way over the lush green grass of the water hole to her side. His ruthless hands jerked her to him and his kiss was tasteless and savage against the side of her face as she twisted her lips away from his mouth.

"You better decide to act nice," he growled. "It'll make it that much easier on you."

HER small fists beat at him impotently and her tiny feet struck out at his heavy, knee-length cavalry boots. His hand caught her arm and wrenched it behind her back.

"All right, now," he snarled. "You're not thinking that marshal is going to help you, are you?"

"Marshal?" she gasped.

"Of course," Captain Luke grunted. "Don't tell me you didn't know he was a Federal man. He's Jeff Read, one of the smartest Pinkerton detectives who ever rode a horse. They have to send the best for me, and they can't ever catch me. Not Captain Luke. I've killed the rest of them and I'll kill him. He can join the U. S. Marshal's staff, but I'll still get him."

He braced his feet apart and his voice, when he yelled, made the hobbled pony jerk up its head.

"I'm Captain Luke!" he yelled. The low buttes surrounding the water hole sent back his voice. "Luke—Luke—Luke!" they echoed. "Come and get me!"

"This man is mad," Laurie told herself. "I've got to get away from here."

She made a few feet toward the pony before his hand caught her and flung her to the ground.

"Stay there," he commanded. "My gang thinks I'm going to meet them at another place, so we won't be disturbed. You stay quiet."

"Put up your hands, *hombre,*" a voice said, out of the cottonwoods. "Put 'em up and keep 'em up."

Captain Luke looked in the direction from which the voice had come. His hand strayed toward the heavy holster where he had stowed the gun he had taken from Old John.

"Easy," cautioned the voice.

Laurie saw the familiar flat-crown Stetson raise itself from the brush.

"Look out!" she cried.

Captain Luke's gun spoke at the same time. The Stetson jerked and sank out of sight.

"Hah!" cried the man in the cavalry uniform. "The smart Jeff Read. The smartest operative Pinkerton ever owned and he steps out into the open like that. You're losing your grip, Read."

He fired again at the bushes from which the flat-topped hat had risen. He snapped the trigger once more and there was a dry *click.* With a curse, Captain Luke threw away the gun and plunged toward the undergrowth, his big fingers outstretched like talons. He had gone approximately ten feet before a brown hand caught his ankle and he stretched forward.

[*Turn page*]

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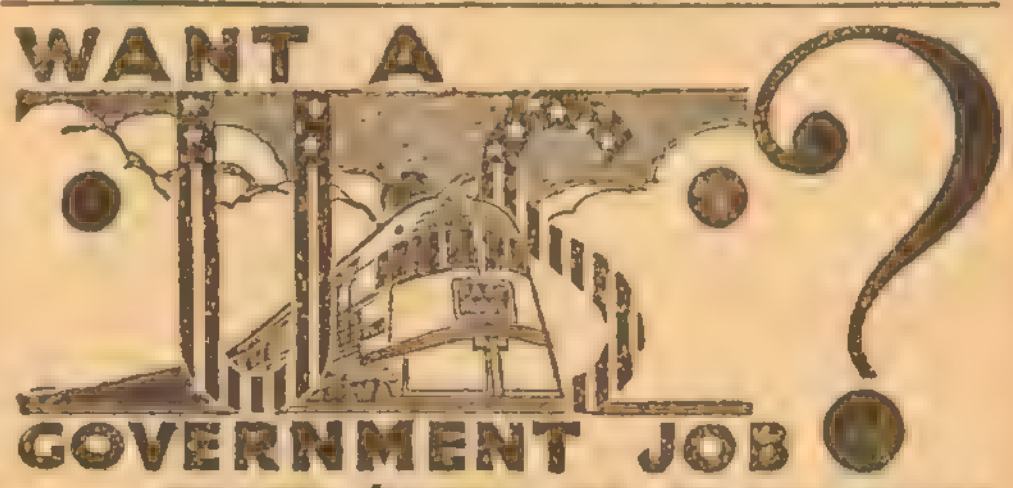

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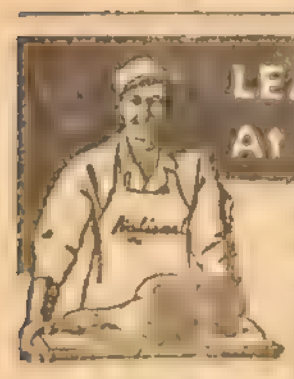

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Birdie came out of nowhere and put a knee into the small of the outlaw's back. From a place in the underbrush not far from the spot the Navajo had sprung from, Jeff Read rose to his feet, his Stetson dangling from the switch he held in one hand. The red headed man looked at the gray hat ruefully.

"Two bullet holes," he announced. "One carbine and one pistol."

He walked toward the man who lay pinned under the Indian's grip.

"Let him up, Birdie," he said. "Let him up and see if he can fight as well as he can maul women and shoot old men."

The Navajo stepped aside and Captain Luke got to his feet slowly. He had been a handsome, curly-headed young man, but now he was an evil thing with a face twisted into a snarl.

"My band will get you for this," he announced.

"You haven't got any band," Jeff Read said. "That hundred dollars in gold you offered for my hide sent them right into the arms of a troop of *real* cavalry that was waiting for them, down the lane. Most of them died with their guns in their hands. Those that didn't will live to die on a rope—like you."

There was an animal snarl from the man in the blue uniform as he started a rush toward Jeff Read. He made five running steps before there was the dry crack of a derringer. Lieutenant Clark—Captain Luke—stopped, bent double. His hands clutched at his stomach and a crimson stain seeped through his fingers. He coughed, horribly, and then pitched forward. The toe of one boot thumped against the dry ground, and then was still.

"Me kill-um," Birdie announced, calmly. The Navajo put the snub-nosed pistol back into the waistband of his ragged pants. "He try to kill Old John, me kill-um."

"Well, yes." Jeff Read said, slowly. "You kill-um, all right."

READ turned to Laurie.

"I guess there's a lot of questions that have to be answered," he said. "First, I'm a U.S. marshal, and we traced Captain Luke—as this pole-cat called himself—down into this territory. We knew he was using cavalry uniforms and posin' as

an Army officer, but we didn't know he was so close. When he rode up, I was afraid that the cavalry troop I had workin' with me was too far behind. They put out the story, round about, on how I was a deserter from Woolley's troop, hopin' Luke would start hunting for me, somehow."

His white teeth showed in his sudden grin.

"He didn't have much time," he said. "Sure enough, we all met up with each other at your place."

He moved forward a step to catch the girl's elbow as she swayed. His arm was hard and sinewy as she clung to it, while the lush greenery of the waterhole spiraled dizzily.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "But I've been so worried!"

"It's all right, Miss Laurie," he said, softly. "Old John is going to live—just a piece of lead through the flesh—and the war's about over, I guess. The telegraph said that General Lee has surrendered at a place called Appomattox, wherever that is. So it doesn't make any difference now, if you are a little rebel."

"Just hold me," Laurie begged. "Just hold me close for a minute."

The tall man's arm tightened. Laurie's eyes closed as she leaned against the protective bulk of this red headed stranger who had come riding out of nowhere. She would be content, she thought, to stay in that embrace for the rest of her life, and, somehow, she knew that that was where she belonged and, the fates willing, that was where she would be.

"*Ugh,*" Birdie grunted. "Love medicine. I go now."

"And don't come back for awhile," Jeff Read said, as he lowered his face to the waiting lips of the girl in his arms.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

JIM HATFIELD

in

GULF GUNS

By

JACKSON COLE

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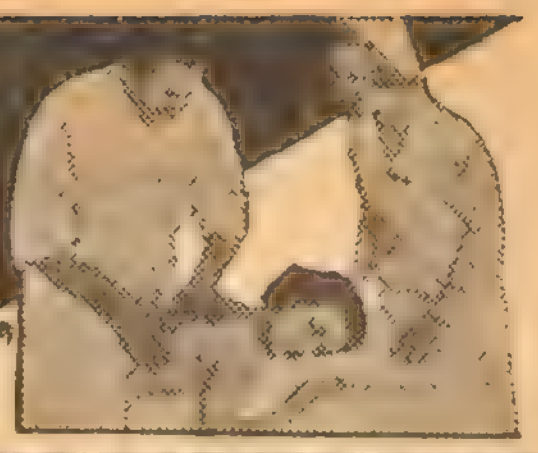

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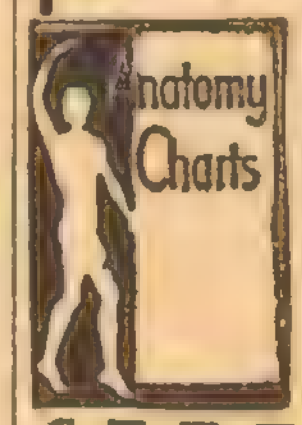

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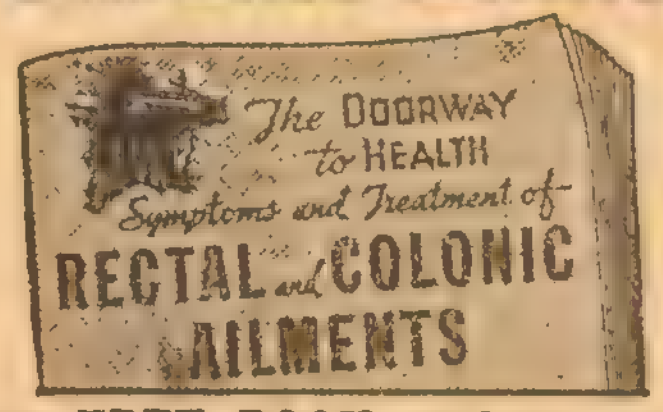

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 10)

outfits to the great land company spreads with thousands of head. Woolgrowers also hit the jackpot. They're clipping coupons as well as sheep.

The upshot is a new struggle for grass. Anywhere that a critter can graze, their owners are bidding for leases. Quite a heap of grass pirating going on, too. A band of cattle or sheep being herded from one grazing area to another, they're not particular whose grass they eat.

So there's a price tag on grassblades and in some sections there's a holler for more liberal hunting laws—longer open season and bigger bag limits on deer—the claim being that they take grass needed for domestic livestock. Sounds sort of cold-blooded. But if you pay big money for grazing rights you don't hanker for dude hunters to lug it off in the shape of game meat. That's the ranchers' way of looking at it.

On top of it all, there's half again as many licensed hunters as there was in 1941. In small game sport, the hunters won't do so much shooting, though. Uncle Sam shortened duck season and cut the daily bag limit to seven birds. Unless you're rich it doesn't pay to travel far to pot only seven ducks. You can get that many in one shot on the Texas gulf.

The Game Warden's Job

Come to think about it, how'd you like to be a game warden? It's about the most underpaid job there is and most everybody wishes you the worst luck possible, no matter how polite they are to your face. Arrest a violator and he's your sworn enemy for life. Make no arrests and the entire community cusses you. A game warden is about as popular as a dog catcher, yet I've known some mighty fine men who wore the badge.

It's an old saying that the only time you're ever apt to meet up with a game warden is when it happens you haven't got your license on you.

All my life I've fished and hunted but only on three occasions was checked up on. One time, after he'd performed his duty, the warden guided me to a place where fishing

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was a sight better than anywhere I knew. Another time a warden helped me catch up a horse to lug my deer in.

Seems to me, if I was a game warden, I'd cotton to all the small boys in my bailiwick. It's the men of tomorrow who are the most "agin" game hogs, who spoil sport for the coming generation. I bet a band of junior deputies could do plenty to discourage outlaw hunters.

The Fish De-Liar

Here's something sort of different in fish yarns. Friend of mine got himself a little gadget called a fish de-liar. It was a pocket-sized scale that weighed up to eight pounds and a tape measure 24 inches long pulled out of it.

On his first trip with the de-liar, he caught himself a fish too hefty for it to weigh, too long for it to measure. Which gave him the best opportunity for lying he'd ever had before.

Do you know whats' the most numerous species of fish in America, you outdoor folks? It isn't an American fish at all, but the carp, which was imported from Germany some sixty-odd years ago. The first imported carp cost $5 each. In a few years carp were being sold for $5 a ton—for fertilizer. Later on, carp were packed in ice and shipped back to Germany for food and seiners were being hired to get rid of them in lakes where they'd increased to pest proportions.

The latest fish that does plumb too well in this country is the goldfish, imported from Japan. Fugitives from gold fish bowls have somehow got into western waters where they've multiplied so fast that they're crowding out native 'game fish.

The most welcome immigrant in the list of wildlife is the Chinese pheasant which has come to be one of our most plentiful game birds. All of which reminds me of the Texas cowpuncher who signed the pledge after seeing a deer with horns that grew like corkscrews. Only to find out later that it was a species of African antelope that he had sure enough seen, and which had been shipped in for experimental purposes and turned loose to roam by a big ranch outfit.

More range gossip next month, folks! See you then.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

CAPTAIN William McDowell, chief of Texas Rangers, sniffed at the warm air of his Austin headuarters office. He was a long way from the sea, but he could smell a fishy odor, and his flared nostrils and smoul-

[*Turn page*]

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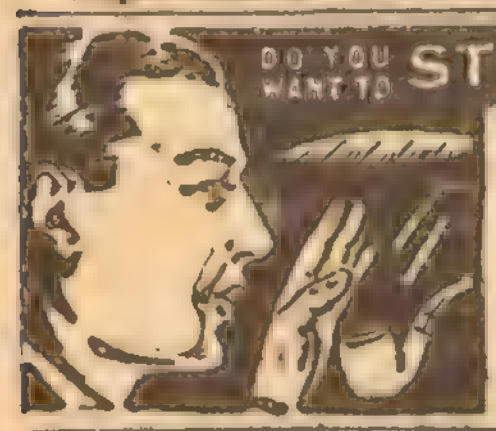

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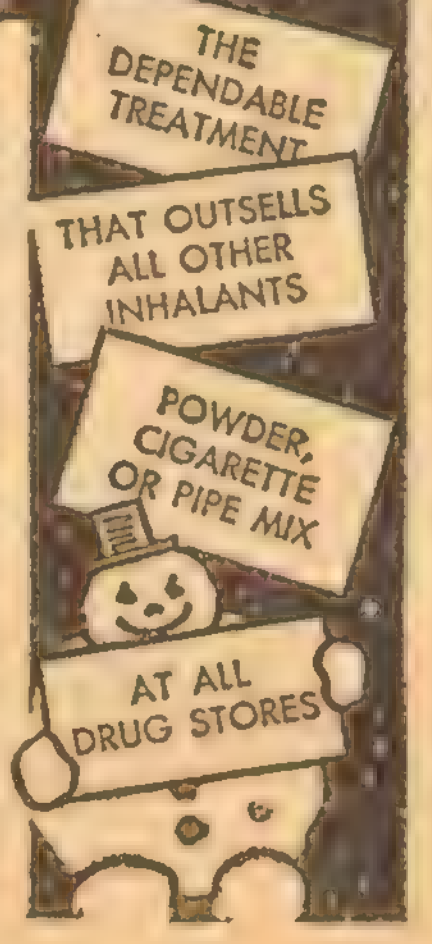

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dering eyes betrayed the fact that he did not enjoy it.

The telegram which had spoiled the captain's morning had come in only a short time before. The complaint it contained had burst upon him like a bombshell, for all of his Rangers except one were far from Austin.

Yet that one Ranger who was available was Jim Hatfield, and McDowell, stewing in his own juice, swearing to himself, turned to greet his ace man as a quiet step sounded on the threshhold.

"Hatfield! Have a seat—smoke a seegar. Pour yoreself a snifter."

The gray-green, steady eyes of Jim Hatfield soothed McDowell. Tall, bronzed by sun and wind, Hatfield possessed features that were rugged. He had wide shoulders and a lean, long body that tapered to narrow hips, where reposed his big Colt revolvers. No man could beat Hatfield in action and speed. He was steel, hickory and coiled chain-lightning, as evil-doers who had been struck by his power had learned to their sorrow.

"Thanks, Cap'n," Hatfield said. "I'm ready to go." The voice was astonishingly gentle. Toward women and decent folks, Hatfield was friendly, helpful. Toward the evil-doer, the reaction was different.

"Got a complaint here, signed by Kunnel Alf Russell, who owns the Square R down in Goliad County," growled McDowell. "He and his neighbors all bin losin' cows. Russell claims his son-in-law, one Cap'n Frank Tate, was kilt on the Gulf coast, and he b'lieves a passel of rascals operatin' in the vicinity of Port Aransas, sixty mile' east of the Square R, are responsible. Sounds like some new gang startin' operations."

Hatfield took it all in, fixing names and places in his memory.

"Big money in the fishin' business," boomed McDowell. "Feeds a lot of Texans, and fishermen 're entitled to our pertection as well as anybody else."

"You bet," agreed Hatfield. "Then I'll be headin' for Port Aransas and the Square R right away."

The tall man shook hands and went outside. In the sunlight, he mounted a golden sorrel he had brought around from the rack at the side of the building. The horse was Goldy, his companion of the dangerous trails. Powerful, magnificent in speed and courage, Goldy was restless for excitement and ready to move.

McDowell waited to see the last of his star officer as Hatfield hit the road southeast for the Square R and the Gulf.

"I hope he comes back!" the captain muttered. "Sure hate to lose Hatfield. . . My right arm."

That's the exciting beginning of GULF GUNS, by Jackson Cole, the great novel of suspense and gunsmoke along the Texas Gulf coast, that's featured in next month's TEXAS RANGERS.

The trouble that Jim Hatfield was out to beat down was serious indeed. Captain Frank Tate, owner of a fleet of fishing boats, and a kindly family man who was loved by all, had been brutally murdered. Patrick Floyd, ringleader of a trio that included a half-drunk sailor named Walther and a Mex-

[*Turn page*]

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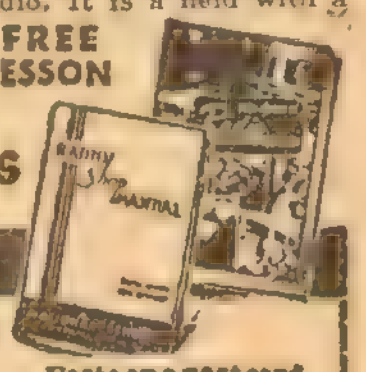

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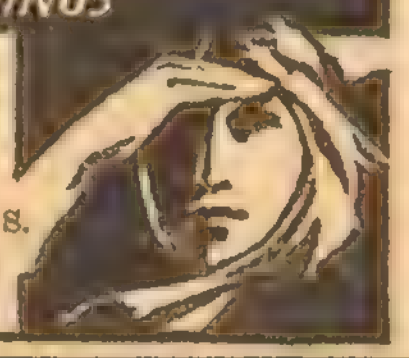

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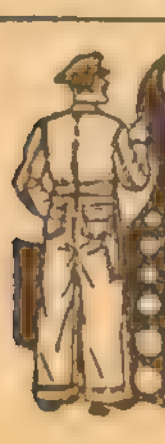

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ican-American known as Felipe Quintero, was the killer.

"My name is Patrick Floyd," the man had introduced himself to Tate just before the murder. "You may not have heard of me on the waterfront, but soon everybody'll know who I am. There's plenty of profit in fishing and I aim to control the shebang on the Gulf."

Felipe Quintero had contributed his own part of the plot.

"Senor Boss," Quintero had said. "When we have boats, we must feed man-ee mouths. I savvy where to get plenty cows, cheap."

That was the crux of what was wrong. And now here, just a sample of the action in GULF GUNS:

Jim Hatfield, in the ebony shadows cast by brush, inched forward now toward a little clearing two hundred yards off the Gulf road. In that clearing the large gang he had been trailing had paused to rest their horses. Hatfield was about thirty-six hours out of Austin. It was the morning after Captain McDowell had despatched him to Goliad County and the Square R.

Frozen in place behind the dense thickets, Hatfield strained his ears to catch what was being said. The accented voice of the little Mexican knifeman called for attention, and the general talk of the riders stopped.

"Boys, we heet zem at eleven o'clock. Zey weel be 'sleep by zen. Must be no meestakes, savvy? Zese hombres weel fight hard eef we geeve zem a chance, so no mer-cy. Shoot queeck and straight."

"Hey, Felipe," called a hoarse voice. "I wanta drill that cussed cowboy myownself. He downed my pard, Dinny, in that scrap the other night."

"Zat ees Paul Anders. He work' for Russ-ell," nodded Felipe. "You go weeth bunkhouse gang, Luke. Anders should be zere."

The little Mexican slammed a brown fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Remem-bair, zis Square R ees dan-gair to us, great dan-gair. Zey wreck us eef we do not wreck zem first. Trouble comes from zis range, spies, com-plaints."

Jim Hatfield, on Goldy, moved after the gun-crew again as they rode. If he had known a shortcut to the Square R, he could have ridden ahead and warned the ranch that was now to be a target for attack. But he did not even know its exact location. Nevertheless, in his mind, he formed a plan.

Using every precaution to prevent his presence from becoming known to the foe, Hatfield kept after them until the buildings of the ranch loomed ahead on high ground. Its structures were darkened for the night, but they stood out against the moon-sky. Now the gunnies pulled up and gathered about their leader, as Felipe gesticulated and sent squads around to dispose of various spots where resistance might be expected. The bunkhouse and the main home would hold most of the Square R's fighting men.

"Now's the time," muttered the Ranger.

Then, without hesitation, and in plain view of all the gunmen, Jim Hatfield galloped his horse at full tilt directly toward the ranch!

"Square R—up and at 'em!" roared the stentorian voice of the racing Ranger. "Out and fight! Fetch yore guns!"

And as Jim Hatfield shouted that warning to the sleeping ranch, the guns of thirty-five killers opened up on him. . . .

GULF GUNS, by Jackson Cole, in next month's issue of TEXAS RANGERS, finds Jim Hatfield at his fightingest, shootingest best! You've thrilled to his glamorous, exciting exploits in the past. You liked our previous novels. Well, this new yarn tops all

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of them! Stupendous, terrific, colossal—all these adjectives, and more still, wouldn't be enough to describe GULF GUNS. Remember—it's in next month's TEXAS RANGERS. . Of course, there'll be plenty other fast-action stories of the West packed along in the same issue. It'll be an all-star, rootin'-tootin' magazine—featuring the kind of stories that have made TEXAS RANGERS a favorite with Western fans!

OUR MAIL BAG

READERS, your letters have been grand and we appreciate them mightily, for it's your fine criticisms and suggestions that make our magazine what it is. So keep on writing in, and don't be surprised if you find an excerpt from your letter printed in this column.

Here is what some of our readers have to say this month:

I have read quite a lot of Jim Hatfield novels and other stories in TEXAS RANGERS. I don't think I have read of any other character who is more interesting or that I like better. Once you start a Jim Hatfield story you hate to stop till it's finished. Some of those stories make me long to be in the saddle too.

Do you think a young fellow who enjoys the wild, rough, outdoor life would have any chance of joining

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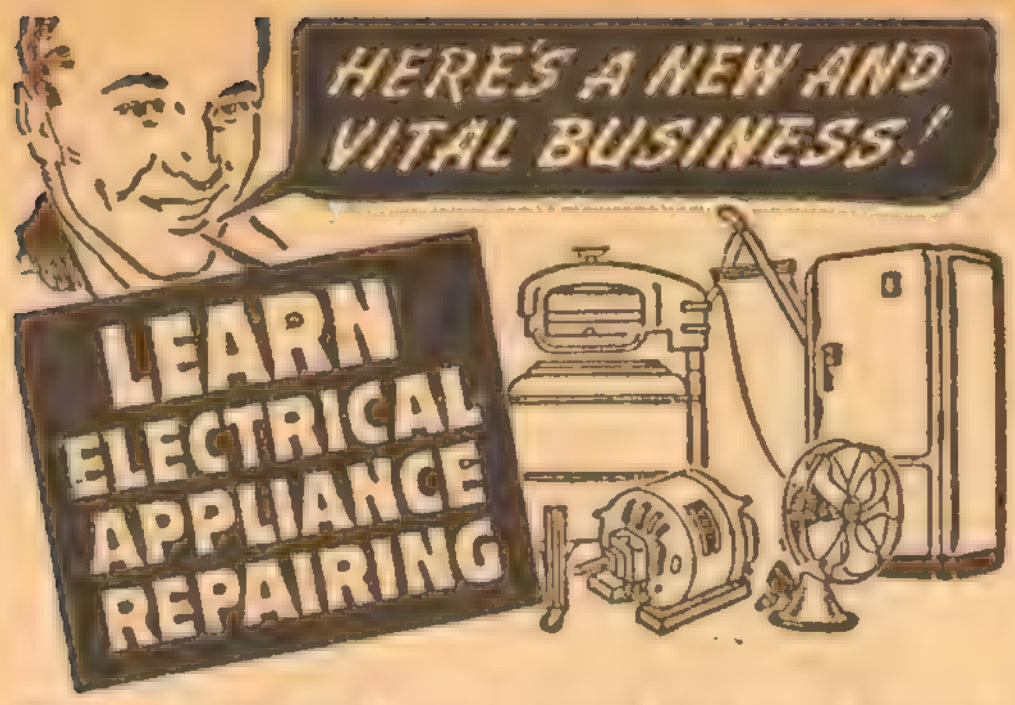

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the Texas Rangers? I read in your magazine where cattle rustling was still going on out there in Texas. I saw too that the Texas Rangers were kept on the hop in the thinly populated range country where they still fork horses and pack six-guns. How can I find out about joining the Rangers?—*William Christie, Glen Sutton, Que.*

Write to the Texas State Department of Safety, Austin, Texas. They'll give you all the information you want, Bill. Good luck!

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a long time and I really enjoy it. But I would enjoy it more if there were love scenes. Jim should fall in love with girls. That's the big thing that makes a story interesting. Jackson Cole is a good writer, but let's have some stories of Jim falling in love. Please!—*Harold Mellis, Stiles, Wis.*

Couldn't you have a story about Billy the Kid in your book once in a while, or a story of Gene Autry? I think Jim Hatfield should not get married. I would like him to have a police dog or a big collie dog that can stand outdoor weather.—*Mahlon Kleintop, Bethlehem, Pa.*

Jim Hatfield and Goldy seem so real that sometimes I forget they are only wonderful characters in your book. But there is one thing which I do not agree with. In a recent issue Captain Starr said, "To date, Nature hasn't favored the Lone Star State with an active volcano." I think Nature has favored the Lone Star State very much by sending us oil instead of a volcano. But I found reading about the volcano very interesting.—*Gene Davis, San Antonio, Tex.*

I have just finished reading BAD MEDICINE FOR BUCKAROOS. It was a very swell story. Jim Hatfield is getting better in every issue. I would like you to put a picture of Jim Hatfield and Goldy on the front of a magazine.—*Dean Sharpe, Lexington, N. C.*

Jackson Cole is a fine author, but he doesn't always do Jim Hatfield justice. One of your readers says let there be more fist fighting instead of gun-play. I don't agree.—*Donald Gurley, Newnan, Ga.*

I was reading DOC SWAP'S OPERA OPUS and I laughed until the tears rolled down my cheeks. I am almost seventy-seven, and I'd rather read TEXAS RANGERS than eat. For my food sure tastes better after a hearty laugh.—*Kitty May Ellis, Snohomish, Wash.*

Let's have a little more of gun and fist fights.—*Everett L. Stedman, Terre Haute, Ind.*

I can't in any way make out why some folks want Ranger Jim Hatfield to fall in love and marry. One reason I buy and read TEXAS RANGERS is because I hate reading mushy stories. He is much more exciting the way he is. Also the stories have all got a different ending than most stories which end with love.—*Mrs. Doris Chalke, Utica, N. Y.*

I have just read your last story about Jim Hatfield and do not like the way it ended, because Jim lives a lonely life. I enjoy your stories very much. I am in the Army and I read them before I go to bed. They are clean stories.—*T/S Joe C. Pierce, Pasadena, Cal.*

TEXAS RANGERS is the best western magazine I have ever read. I mean the Lone Wolf stories. The short stories aren't so good. In fact, sometimes I don't even read them. Jim Hatfield's best stories to me are when the outlaw chief keeps well under cover. I like to figure out who he is. IRON MEN AND GOLD was a good novel, but GUNSMOKE EMPIRE tops it. Make

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the stories a little longer, won't you?—*Wiley Brown, Jr. Elizabeth City, N. C.*

Jim Hatfield is my favorite Ranger. I think the stories that he is in are very good. But the short stories are good also.—*Ralph Empen, Maquon, Ill.*

As a Texan, I think that it takes something mighty good to rate using the name Texas. I think that your magazine lives up to the name of our Great Lone Star State by being something extra special. Jim Hatfield is just what a real Texas Ranger should be.—*Marie White, Houston, Texas.*

I had my folks send TEXAS RANGERS to me while I was overseas, and I enjoyed each and every story I read. I have to disagree with Rafael Cestro, Jr., who suggested that Jim Hatfield have a partner who is not a Ranger to go on his trips with him. I myself am an ex-combat man with much scouting experience and I found I could do it better alone.—*Cpl. William Casteel, Fort Dix, N. J.*

The story THE GUNS OF AVALON in a recent issue is indeed very good, but the author slipped in having an ambusher use a Winchester rifle so soon after the Mexican War. The Winchester rifle did not come into use until about 1869.—*Dr. B. R. Upchurch, Boxelder, Tex.*

That's all the letters we have room for this month, but keep on writing in, won't you? And thanks to all of you who have already written! Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

See you all next month, pards!

—THE EDITOR.

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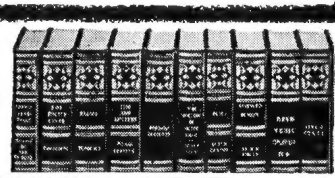

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